KINDRED SPIRITS: STORIES OF SISTER RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This sociological study explores the construction of feminine subjectivities within biological sister relationships - a neglected, socially invisible tie. The qualitative research design, data collection and analysis are embedded in feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism. Sociological work in auto/biography is applied as a method for collecting and analysing sister life histories.

Four methods were used to collect data from 37 women from varied class and ethnic backgrounds across six decades aged between 6 and 50 in the UK: a questionnaire; an Ecomap; a Flowchart; and a semi-structured depth interview. Five elements of the bond were documented: contact patterns, types of tie, factors affecting these ties, comparisons with female friendship, and changes over time.

The data from 29 interviews were analysed through case studies, the auto/biographical method and grounded theory. A typology of four strands was developed to analyse the women's narratives: *best friendship*, *close* and *distant companionship*, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. Contact patterns between sisters were associated with forms of female friendship: some ties recalled the intensity of *best friendship*; others, the positive and negative aspects of distance and separateness of *close* and *distant companionship*.

Sister ties evolve over time, moving from *best friendship* during girlhood to *companionship* in womanhood, or vice-versa. Change stems from circumstances external to the tie, and from internal shifts. These external changes - oscillating patterns of dependence and independence - are linked to turning-points and life events: changing school, acquiring and losing girlfriends and boyfriends, leaving home, starting work, divorce, bereavement, and mothering.

Internal shifts are triggered by factors additional to life-stage and age: changing power relations and emotions. These are analysed in terms of the *positioned* discourse which reproduces elements of mother-daughter relationships, especially minimothering, where power tends to be hegemonic; and the *shifting positions* discourse, where role reversals occur and women alternately adopt dominant, dominated, or more equal positions of power. The role of 'agentic subjectivity' in the move in and out of one discourse to another is highlighted.

In memory of my mother and her sister who both died a decade ago -

in memory of their lives, their bond and their inspiration.

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Introduction

This study seeks to capture and make 'sense of what it means to have lived' (Henley 1997:6) in terms of the sistering experience, a socially invisible aspect of many women's lives. Over three-quarters of all older adults have one or more sisters or brothers yet little is known about the actual and potential supportive role they play for each other in later life (Avioli 1986). Sister relationships in girlhood and womanhood are examined in a small empirical study using qualitative methods. The focus is on how sisters who have an active relationship, or some form of contact with each other, understand its evolution and changes in the relationship over time. This exploratory study examines empirically concepts derived from feminist standpoint and post-structuralist theories such as emotions and power relations, in order to see how subjectivity is constructed in sister relationships. The material presented draws on 29 interviews with 37 women living in the UK.

The aim of this study of sister relationships during girlhood and womanhood is to examine how sisters who have an active bond[1] with each other understand its evolution and changes over time. The study has four aims: first, to provide new information on an unexplored kin relationship and hidden aspect of women's lives, through their sistering experiences. The second aim, is to make a theoretical contribution to the sociology of kin and friendship networks through conceptualising the social and individual effects of these kin relationships - as a form of social support and as accommodation, survival or resistance to existing patterns of familial and sexual relationships[2].

A third aim is to explore how subjectivity is constructed in sister relationships by employing and testing empirically concepts derived from post-structuralist theories[3]. These concepts include emotions, talk and negotiation particularly in the context of power relations between sisters. Finally, this study also aims to contribute to the methodological literature on researching family and personal relationships, a sensitive area of private life which raises a number of ethical dilemmas.

Five questions dictated the direction of the study. What are the different types of ties that exist between sisters? What type of contact do they have? What factors affect their ties? What similarities and differences exist between these ties and other female friendships?

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1 The terms bond, relationship and tie are used interchangeably throughout the study and do not imply an essentialist approach to sisters.

2 See Hey (1997); Finch and Mason (1993); Morgan (1990); Oliker (1989).

3 See Kenway and Blackmore (1995); Jones (1993); Alcoff (1988); Lather (1988).

And how do sister relationships evolve over time? The empirical data generated from these research questions provide insights and ideas about the sister tie - as experienced by the participants in the study - and reveal in detail significant processes at work. They do not however lead to more widely generalisable conclusions applicable to the sister relationship more broadly.

The rationale for focusing on sister relationships was threefold: one was the invisibility of the tie as a social phenomenon and as a sociological topic; another was the myth about sister ties and kin ties more broadly; a third was my personal interest. Sisters' stories remain less heard than other facets of women's lives. While interest in the significance of relationships between siblings or 'sibships'[4] including sisters across the life-span and their emotional intensity is not new[5], adult sister ties are studied less in sociology compared to other family relationships and friendship ties. In addition, the type of data collected and the way data are presented do not make comparisons possible (O'Connor 1992; Allan 1977a). Yet the myth about sisters, and kin ties more generally, called upon by some of the women in the current study, is that 'blood is thicker than water'. This myth carries the idea that the biological bond invokes stronger loyalty than other non-kin ties - that kin will 'come through' in times of hardship. A detailed analysis of the sister tie, as mapped out in this thesis, reveals a more complex picture than the one suggested by the myth.

My personal interest in sister relationships has three sources. Initially, it grew out of earlier empirical work I carried out on family communication about health[6] in which some of the findings about teenage sisters' talk had certain parallels with my own experience of being a sister. My identity as sister and my own changing relationship with my sister was a key motivating factor in conducting the study. My curiosity in the topic increased as I discovered the absence of sociological material on sisters' ties. Another source was my experience of my mother's bond with her sister and dynamic female friendships, and my recent awareness of their 'multiple selves' as mothers, wives, girlfriends *and* sisters. This post-structural notion of a multiple self formed a key area of investigation in the thesis which I turn to next in my description of the theoretical roots of my sociological interest in sisters.

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4 This term is borrowed from Powell and Steelman (1990), and from Hudson (1992:2). Hudson defines 'sibships' as fraternities, or sororities I would add, in a literary context: 'Based on mutual respect, individual worth, and shared beliefs and concerns, they herald a new dimension in the English novel to the extent that they are relatively egalitarian societies'.

5 See Murphy (1992); Dowdeswell (1988); Lamb and Sutton-Smith (1982).

6 A total of 40 families were interviewed in *The Natural History of the Family Project*, a qualitative study commissioned as part of the Health Education Authority's national *Family Health Research Programme* (see Holland *et al.* 1996).

In defining the scope of the thesis, there were two areas which intrigued me, only one of which I ultimately pursued. The first was the question of how sister relationships are affected by *external* social structures - the family and heterosexuality, for example - and whether or how these affect them in turn. Here, my interest was in how changing subjectivities intermesh with broader social structures[7]. I was curious about the idea of sister relationships as both an 'empowering place' and as oppressive, as Hey (1997:132) documents in her ethnography of girlfriendship among teenage girls - a source of comfort *and* subordination for them.

The second area that captivated me, and the thread that I followed, was the idea of the production of subjectivity within this specific site: not merely the familial context, but the private world of a female tie for '...we know far less about how families 'make people' through definitions of appropriate femininity' (Holland 1995). How is subjectivity produced in the female tie of sistering? Is it formed inside or outside the bond, or both? And to what extent can subjectivity remould itself in this context?

Other sociologists have embraced with caution or optimism this question of the possibilities of refashioning subjectivity (Hey 1997; Giddens 1992), for 'reworking the self' as Hey (1997:144) notes, requires 'the power to imagine and rework both a self and a future; it requires time, aspiration, resources, ambition, energy and confidence.' This was part of what I was eager to explore: the extent to which 'narratives of "imperfect" selves' searching 'for coherence in their imperfect worlds' (Hey 1997:145) change and can be remoulded - are remoulded.

In the course of the research, my thinking evolved. My fascination with the first question, the extent to which sister relationships have an entrenching or liberating effect on women in terms of their position in the social structure - the family and heterosexuality - remained alive throughout the study. In practice however, I paid greater attention to the second question: it was the role of the sister relationship in women's narratives of self or construction of their own subjectivities on which I concentrated.

Both questions address the society/individual or structure/agency issue. The difference between each question, and the way that each is framed here, lies in the different approach to this central issue which each embodies. The first question reflects the modernist approach to the structure/agency issue in terms of a dichotomy; this was my position at the

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7 For an analysis of the family as a site of production of subjectivity, see Delphy and Leonard (1992). For an analysis of formations of subjectivity in a different site - school, in relation to homosociability and heterosexuality, see Hey (1997); and in relation to homosexualities, see Epstein and Johnson (1998).

outset. During the research process, my thinking shifted to a less dichotomous view of the relationship between the individual and society and became more post-structural. I addressed this key sociological issue from a post-structural stance reflected by my interest in the production and formation of subjectivity in a specific social structure - the female kin tie of sistering, which exists within the confines of a patriarchal and heterosexual site - the family.

In the thesis, the formation and production of subjectivity is examined at two levels: first, at the level of the sister tie itself, through its chronological evolution and transformation over time, through the decades of girlhood to womanhood. Secondly, changing subjectivity is examined through shifts connected to power relations and emotions, in its modification both inside and outside the sister tie. What connects these two themes is the idea of change and how it occurs: in relation to events external to the sister tie, through turning-points and life events, as well as internal - shifting patterns of power relations, and emotions. How does the sister tie affect feminine subjectivity and vice-versa? These are two ways of understanding sisters' experiences of their relationships.

These two levels - changing relationships and changing subjectivity - are explored through several concepts derived from feminist standpoint theory, feminist post-structuralism, sociological work in auto/biography and the data themselves: power relations and emotions, subjectivity and the role of discourse or language, and the notion of the social and material experienced and lived through the auto/biographical and the discursive. The concept of power relations, for example, is examined for the role that it plays in locking women into or freeing them from certain positions in the sister tie, in relation to the family context. Emotions are considered for the way that they lead to intimacy, distance, difference or resentment; for it is partly through emotions that subjectivity itself is produced. Subjectivity is understood as 'agentic' (Maynard 1995:274) enabling women to move in and out of specific positionings in their sister tie/s: these positionings form part of the typology created during the study.

A typology rooted in these concepts of power relations and emotions and in the data themselves was developed in order to analyse the women's narratives of their changing sister relationships and changing subjectivity. The typology is made up of four strands. The first two strands define the different types of tie that did exist between the sisters in this study - *best friendship*, and *close* and *distant companionship*. The other two strands describe the changing power relations that can prevail at a single moment in time, or over several years: these are the *positioned* discourse which appears to reproduce specific

elements of mother-daughter relationships, and the *shifting positions* discourse where role reversals occur. Sister relationships may take other forms not documented in this study.

In order to understand the broader chronological background against which these shifts take place - from one strand of the typology to another, during a particular moment in a relationship and over time - the analysis of when and how change in relationships and subjectivities occurs, is structured around turning-points and significant life events. These transitions, which lead to concrete change in the ties and different patterns of dependence and independence include: changing school, acquiring and losing girlfriends and boyfriends, leaving home, starting work, divorce, bereavement, and mothering. All these elements of sister ties are examined in detail in specific chapters.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. **Chapter I** locates sister relationships in two traditions of sociological empirical research: family studies or kinship work and research on friendship. It also traces the origins of the research questions in earlier work on sibling ties and female friendship.

Chapter II outlines the conceptual framework adopted in the study based on two currents of feminist theory, standpoint theory and post-structuralism, as well as auto/biographical work in sociology used as a method to collect and analyse sister life histories. It sets out the theoretical concepts developed for interpreting the data: power relations, emotions, subjectivity, and crucially language or discourse connected to talk and text.

Chapter III describes the auto/biographical approach used to collect life histories of women's relationships with one or more of their sisters. It details the methods employed in the field and the methodological and ethical issues that surfaced in researching this particular dimension of private kin life.

Chapter IV presents the method of data analysis employed in the study adapted from grounded theory, case study analysis and the auto/biographical method. Then it defines the typology, through a case study of Beth and Louise, which is subsequently applied to interpretations of other sister relationships in the following four chapters. Lastly, it considers dilemmas of representing sensitive aspects of private ties when making visible multiple perspectives of relationships in the public realm.

Chapter V focuses on the first two strands of the typology: *best friendship*, *close* and *distant companionship*. General traits of these ties are sketched before being illustrated in

more detail through three case studies of teenagers Zoe and Sofia, and of adult sisters Lauren and her sisters, and Rowena and *Grace*[8].

Chapter VI examines the impact of turning-points such as bereavement, acquisition and loss of friends and lovers, and divorce on changes that occur in sister relationships. Here the focus is on how external circumstances trigger change in sister ties. The evolution of two relationships between women in their thirties and forties is highlighted. The two case studies examine the shift from Leila and *Annar's distant companionship* in their teens to *best friendship* in their adult years; and change in the opposite direction of Madonna and Roxanne's teenage *best friendship* to *distant companionship* in their current lives.

Chapter VII considers the two other strands of the typology, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses, through three further case studies of women in their thirties and forties: Suzanne and *Collette*, Jeanne, and Hazel and Phoebe. This chapter shows how moves occur out of the *positioned* discourse into the *shifting positions* discourse, prompted by changing subjectivity. Here, in addition to life events such as motherhood, bereavement, and divorce, the emphasis is on how internal change occurs in sister relationships, prompted by shifting power relations, and emotions.

Chapter VIII explores the way that changing subjectivity emerges within the sister relationship or outside it in other bonds. In particular, subjectivity is examined for the way that it is refashioned inside and outside the sister tie, either voluntarily through agentic subjectivity, or involuntarily, through turning-points and life events. Four case studies are presented: first, two *best friendship* ties are compared, those between women in their twenties - Rae and Bukhi, and Chloe and Annabel. Secondly, two *distant companionship* ties are scrutinised and contrasted, those between women in their thirties and fifties - Rowena and *Grace*, and Clare and *Stella*.

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8 The names of women such as *Grace* and *Annar* who could not or declined to take part in the study and yet still appear in their sisters' narratives are italicised in order to reflect their involuntary presence and silent voices in the research.

Chapter I

Substantive Research About Sisters

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> From adolescence onwards, young women have tried to understand, with one another, the world around them. Female friendships have taken on enormous significance and prominence. [...] For many women, intimate relationships with women friends, sisters, aunts and co-workers are a bedrock of stability in their lives. (Orbach and Eichenbaum 1987:17-18)

Introduction

This chapter reviews recent research on sister relationships. It locates the focus on the sister bond in two traditions of sociological empirical research: family studies or kinship work and research on friendship. It also traces the origins of the current study's research questions. The chapter is in four parts: first it considers the neglect of sister relationships in sociological research and offers some explanations. Secondly, it reviews existing research on sisters in psychology and medicine. Thirdly, it examines kinship and friendship studies in sociology that refer to sisters. Lastly, it describes several factors, particularly age, relevant to an understanding of sister ties.

1. An invisible relationship in the public sphere[1]

Unlike motherhood, marriage, and 'the family' (Clark and Haldane 1990; Rich 1984), relationships between biological sisters lack their own social institutions or representations in the public sphere. This raises difficulties for undertaking research on a topic that exists primarily in the private realm of domestic and family life with no language, public discourse, institution or images of its own (Mason 1989). How does a researcher explore a socially invisible personal relationship? In Chapter III, I consider the way that I addressed these challenges in the field as well as the methodological issues that ensued. These dilemmas can illuminate other invisible ties without their own social institutions - relationships between lesbians and gays, adopted children and birth parents, step-kin and other family bonds - where among certain cultural groups voluntary negotiation of responsibilities and 'contracting'[2], instead of duty, is becoming the prevailing ethos[3].

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1 This section on 'invisible relationships' also appears in Mauthner (1998).

2 Giddens (1992:155; 158) uses this term as a synonym for negotiation in the context of the 'pure relationship...entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another'.

The absence of representations of sister relationships exists at two levels, in both *public knowledges* (Johnson 1986:287) in general and in social research in particular. By the public sphere, I mean the formal organisations, formalized politics, law, media and academia, and the discourses on high culture and politics that form *public knowledges*. Sister relationships are unrepresented here in contrast with the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law tie, for example, which exists through a long tradition of parody (Cotterill 1994). There are however some exceptions in three specific sites. Sibling rivalry, including rivalry between sisters, is addressed in childcare manuals for parents (Fabera and Mazlish 1987; Reit 1985); images of the sister bond flourish in the media[4], film and fiction - the recent screen adaptations of Jane Austen's novels are a good illustration of this (Mackay 1993; Cahill 1989; McNaron 1985); and sisterhood has provided a metaphor and political rallying point for women coming together in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to build communities and campaign for their rights (Fox-Genovese 1991; Morgan 1984).

Nevertheless these public representations remain marginalised within mainstream culture and fail to provide substantial knowledge of the private *lived cultures* of the world of sister relationships or a language for experiencing this private world as a *lived culture*. Johnson (1986) offers some useful explanations for understanding why this knowledge is not available: power, he says, operates in a way that ignores salient issues for subordinated groups - in this case women - and privatises the *secrecies of the oppressed*. Moreover, public representations of private forms can distort these when they are male-defined and middle-class; they can also universalize, stigmatize or pathologise. Hence, the absence of representations of sister relationships from wider public life explains the lack of a language for sisters themselves to speak about this aspect of their lives 'in public'. A private language however does exist which sisters use to voice their relationship either with each other 'in private' and/or with the researcher - a language of emotions and power relations[5].

This absence of public representations is echoed in the research literature where studies in developmental psychology and medical genetics and illness outnumber sociological work on sisters (O'Connor 1987; Allan 1977a). What little is known about sister relationships concerns psychological rather than social or cultural aspects of this tie, and childhood and old-age rather than adolescence and adulthood (Murphy 1992; Lamb and Sutton-Smith 1982). In addition, the sibling bond or 'sibships' (Hudson 1992; Powell and Steelman 1990), brothers' and other family ties between parents and children have received more

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3 See Edwards *et al.* (1997); Weeks (1997); Weeks *et al.* (1997; 1995); Mason (1996); Finch and Mason (1993); Cornell (1991).

4 See Private Lives (1996); Grant (1994).

5 Power relations are considered in detail in Chapter VII.

attention than sisters' ties (Sharpe 1994a; Apter 1990)[6]. In-law relationships, step-family and gay family ties and family negotiation and communication have also been examined (Cotterill 1994; Weston 1991)[7].

How can this neglect be explained? Relationships between biological sisters remain a taken for granted aspect of women's lives compared with their role and identities as mothers, wives, daughters and even mothers/daughters-in-law[8]. Changes in kin relationships are little researched apart from transitions in marital relationships and the evolution of notions of family responsibility[9]. Relationships between sisters have been the subject of popular psychology and autobiography rather than sociological enquiry (Dowdeswell 1988; Downing 1988; Spender and Spender 1984). While these texts do construct a form of public language about the sister bond, this language is descriptive rather than analytical and focuses on individual rather than social aspects of the bond.

There are a number of reasons why sister relationships remain underexplored compared with other female relationships between mothers and daughters and female friends. Sociology's neglect of private and personal relationships reflects its traditional concern with public, institutional and structural forms of social life and lack of interest in women's relationships with each other in general (Edwards and Ribbens 1998; O'Connor 1992). In particular, the continuing preoccupation with women's gendered servicing and caring role overshadows other possible identities as friend, for example - a tie where pleasure rather than meeting physical dependency needs may be primary (O'Connor 1992).

Secondly, greater attention has been paid to a critique of romantic love than to an exploration of friendship between women apart from historical accounts and recent studies of married women's and girls' friendships[10]. Friendship, equally ignored, is similarly not institutionalized in our society and difficult to define (Allan 1989). There is also the taboo surrounding the underexplored issue of friendship and lesbianism, especially physical intimacy between female friends (Griffin 1994[11]; O'Connor 1992).

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6 See also Warman (1986); Dunn (1984)

7 See also Holland *et al.* (1996); Burgoyne and Clark (1984).

8 See Doucet (1995); Cotterill (1994); Ribbens (1994); Sharpe (1994a); Mason (1987); Brannen and Collard (1982).

9 See Mason (1996; 1989); Edwards (1993b); Finch and Mason (1993); Vaughan (1987).

10 Hey (1997); O'Connor (1991); Oliker (1989); Lasser (1988); Raymond (1986); Faderman (1981); Smith-Rosenberg (1975).

11 One exception is Griffin's British study (1992) with three groups of female friends aged between 12 and 16 of different races where the three main elements of these friendships were: 'having a laugh', 'talking' and physical closeness.

A third reason for this neglect, suggested by my own study, is the gap between the idealized and politicized myths of *sisterhood* as solidarity and similarity upheld by the women's movement (Fox-Genovese 1991; Morgan 1984) and women's personal experiences with a sister, which can include conflict and arouse painful and ambivalent emotions about what is often a sensitive relationship (Sandmaier 1995; Fishel 1994; Mathias 1992). As political ideal, *sisterhood* '...has drawn upon a familial metaphor to evoke an image of non-authoritarian bonding among female peers. It thus sought to retain notions of attachment and loyalty associated with noncontractual family relations' (Fox-Genovese 1991:15-16). While *sisterhood* has come under scrutiny for ignoring class and race differences between women, part of its strength and appeal as a political rallying-point lies in its vision of collective experience and creation of new knowledge about previously invisible aspects of women's lives. I return to the political dimensions of *sisterhood* in the conclusion of the thesis. In Chapter III I examine the difficulties involved in collecting these experiences and creating this knowledge about the sister tie.

The invisibility of sister relationships and sisterhood in the public sphere is reinforced by the presence of institutionalised brotherhood in a number of settings where 'metaphorical bands of brothers, sons, lovers, warriors...' roam and are dominant (Hearn 1992:206). While familial ties between brothers appear to be as little researched as those between sisters, the fraternal ideal of brotherhood and 'mutual concern' prevail in several organisations (Cicirelli 1995; Mendelson 1990; Ervin-Tripp 1989:184). The role of brotherhood in a number of areas of political and social life is more visible and significant than that of sisterhood.

Men have organised and bonded in patriarchal structures which range from the army, pubs and clubs, trade unions and traditional male employment sectors; to secret political organisations and protest movements such as the Afrikaner Broederbond and the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood in the last century; the elitist, male-only and 'extraordinary brotherhood' of Freemasons and its links with government and the law (Knight 1983:1), artistic groups such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and brothers and partners in business and industry - in banking, advertising and glass-making[12]. These public patriarchies and masculinities are in marked contrast with the private femininities examined in the current study (Hearn 1992). The absence of similarly constructed organisations around the notion of sisterhood and its hidden practices, ideologies and identities are highlighted by the prevalence of these masculine 'monocultures' (Hearn 1992:200).

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12 See Gage (1989); Fallon (1988); Hey (1986); Cockburn (1983); Serfontein (1979); Barker (1977); O'Broin (1976); Baring Brothers & Co. Ltd. (1970).

2. Studies in psychology and medicine

The literature in developmental psychology includes research on both sisters and siblings and I distinguish between them where researchers themselves have[13]. Research focuses on infancy and old-age, almost ignoring adolescence and adulthood. Studies of the early years examine sibling rivalry, birth order and sibling bonding[14]. Many studies explore the impact of a disabled child on other siblings[15]; jealousy and coping with the new birth[16]; and the sibling relationship in the context of divorce (Ihinger-Tallman 1986; Taylor 1982). Studies of old-age have focused on how elderly sisters often live together or care for one another and/or share in caring for their parents[17]. Only among the elderly has there been a clear recognition of the potential complexity and centrality of women's relationships with siblings and friends in their lives (O'Connor 1992): much of this research is sociological and I describe it later in the chapter.

By far the most researched topics are the age gap between siblings during childhood and adolescence and rivalry throughout the lifecycle. The age gap debate has dominated child development research. Some researchers believe that the closer the age gap, the closer the relationship, while other studies show that personality and the relationship with parents have greater influence over the quality of the sister bond (Dowdeswell 1988). Work on the age gap during childhood and adolescence has focused on elder sisters' caring responsibility for younger siblings - their support and nurture as well as the challenge and authority they may embody - and the role models they provide[18]; sisters' support for their pregnant teenage sisters (Oz and Fine 1991); sibling aggression[19]; and the link between low inter-parental conflict and low sibling conflict (Brody *et al.* 1987a). These social and inter-personal aspects of sibling and sister relationships are considered in greater detail in the next section on sociological research.

Two American studies have examined sibling and sister relationships in adulthood. One found that adult sisters are closer to each other than brothers are and that same sex pairs are

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13 Material was collected from several sources: database searches were carried out on Medline, ERIC for the period 1982-92, Psych Lit for the period 1987-93, Sociological Abstracts, and Family Resources/National Council on Family Relations (since 1993).

14 See Murphy (1992); Dunn (1984); Bank and Kahn (1982); Dunn and Kendrick (1982); Lamb and Sutton-Smith (1982); McFarland (1938).

15 For a review of the literature on the sibling relationship involving a disabled child see Gallagher and Powell (1989): for autism see McHale *et al.* (1986); for Down's Syndrome see Cuskelly and Dadds (1992); Gath and Gumley (1987). For other studies on siblings and disability see Gladstone and Montgomery (1990); Begun (1989); Brown *et al.* (1989); Lapalus-Netter (1989); Murphy and Della-Corte (1989); Senapati and Hayes (1988); Stoneman *et al.* (1988).

16 See Gottlieb and Mendelson (1990); Allred and Poduska (1988); Schachter and Stone (1987); Jalongo and Renck (1985).

17 See Brody *et al.* (1989); Gold (1987); Matthews (1987); Avioli (1986).

18 See Seginer (1992); Bryant (1989); Stoneman *et al.* (1988; 1986); Bates *et al.* (1983).

19 See Dowdeswell (1988); Felson and Russo (1988); Brody *et al.* (1987b).

closer than cross-sex pairs (Pulakos 1987). Another study which assessed the quality and stability of sibling and sister relationships during two distinct periods - the active childrearing and the empty nest periods - found no differences in affiliation or conflict frequency between the periods (Bedford 1989). More frequent separation themes during the childrearing period suggest a developmental process that might be related to bonding with the family of procreation. A significant finding was that women's stories about sisters across the lifecycle had more conflict themes in them than other siblings' stories. In spite of the number of studies on rivalry and conflict in the early lives of siblings and sisters, most do not conceptualise these dynamics in terms of power relations. This is more the domain of sociological studies where conflict and fighting are theorised as constructing a social process, as friendship and bonding (O'Connor 1992; Allan 1989).

In clinical psychology the two main areas of research are eating disorders[20] and child sexual abuse including father-daughter and sibling incest[21]. Medical studies focus on genetics[22] and terminal illness - especially the effects of one family member's illness on sisters in the family[23]. Research in social psychology has focused on three areas: first, the effect of the family environment on various aspects of siblings' lives, including delinquency (Rowe *et al.* 1992), the effect of parental behaviour on siblings (Brody *et al.* 1992) and their learning (Marjoribanks 1991), intelligence and personality (Lynn *et al.* 1989). Secondly, other studies have examined the link between sibship and educational achievement[24]. Thirdly, a Canadian study has looked at the links between sibship and sexual identity (Blanchard and Sheridan 1992a; 1992b).

3. Sociological research

There are few sociological studies about sister relationships[25]. Sociological research on siblings and women's friendships, including sisters, is located within the tradition of social network and kinship studies. This tradition grew out of British anthropological work on kinship ties and the studies of traditional working-class communities carried out in the 1950s and 1960s[26]. Anthropologists' rather than sociologists' interest in kinship is most

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20 See de Bernart *et al.* (1992); Vandereycken and Vrecken (1992); Casper (1990); Waters *et al.* (1990); Lewis (1987).

21 See Artley (1993); Laviola (1992; 1989); Muram *et al.* (1991); Oliver (1988); Dipietro (1987); Dyke (1987); Fortenberry (1986); Bates *et al.* (1983).

22 See Downing (forthcoming); Fulker (forthcoming); Green *et al.* (1997); Lessor (1993); Salvi *et al.* (1992).

23 See Wilson (1992); Wallinga *et al.* (1987); Koch-Hattem (1986).

24 See Rubenfeld and Gilroy (1991); Powell and Steelman (1990); Hauser and Wong (1989); Goodman (1987).

25 Comprehensive overviews of work on kinship and family relationships can be found in Bernardes (1997), and Gelles (1995). Feminist accounts of the family and kinship include Baber and Allen (1992), and Delphy and Leonard (1992).

26 See Coates and Silburn (1970); Young and Willmott (1962); Mogey (1956); Willmott and Young

evident from their concern with how 'patterns of personal relationships sustain dominant social institutions and practices' (Allan 1989:6)[27].

Sociological research on sisters includes some early work on patterns of sociability between sisters from different class backgrounds (Allan 1977a) and more recent work on married women's friendships where sisters are significant (O'Connor 1992, 1987; Oliker 1989). Allan's work is concerned with the social aspects of friendship while O'Connor's highlights the need to explore the processes involved in creating and maintaining friendship. Female friendship among girls and women, similarly to some mother-daughter relationships, can protect and enhance psychological health and contribute to 'nurturing' ties (Hey 1997; Brown and Gilligan 1992). Far less, however, is known about relationships between sisters. Allan, O'Connor, and Hey's research can be situated in the small but growing field of the sociology of friendship.

My study on sisters draws on both family research and work on women's friendship including best friendship. First, it seeks to place sister relationships in the context of the social network tradition illustrated by Allan (1977a) and O'Connor's (1987) studies on sibling ties and married women's friendships (including kin relationships). Secondly, my study compares and contrasts relationships between sisters with aspects of both the mother-daughter relationship and best friendship. Several sociological studies on the mother-daughter relationship, female friendship and 'best friendship' touch on sisters as 'best friends' (Oliker 1989; O'Connor 1987)[28]. Studies of the mother-daughter relationship highlight relevant themes to do with changes in power, interdependence and separation (Apter 1990; Fischer 1986)[29]. O'Connor (1991; 1987) in her study of the role of kin in married women's friendships found that for a third of the women in her sample their confidante or person with whom they had a high level of intimate confiding was their sister.

These sociological studies have influenced my work theoretically and I consider each in turn: Graham Allan's (1977a) research on adult sibling relationships, Pat O'Connor's (1987) and Stacey Oliker's (1989) research on married women's best friends, Valerie Hey's ethnography of girls' best friendship (1997) and several non-academic studies of sisters and siblings in popular psychology and sociology.

(1960); and for a contemporary example, O'Brien and Jones (1995).

27 See also Medick and Sabean (1984); Leyton (1974).

28 See also Hey (1997); Apter (1990).

29 See also Nice (1992); Cohler and Grunebaum (1981).

Graham Allan: 'sibling solidarity' and 'best friend' siblings

Graham Allan's small empirical study (1977a) of sibling relationships among 41 adults in Essex, including relationships between sisters, grew out of the earlier kinship studies. His research on adult siblings carried out in mid lifecycle highlights the importance of the social aspect of the sibling relationship and contributes to theorising sibship and friendship ties. Influenced by Young and Willmott (1962) who noted that there was often a special tie between siblings nearest in age in large families, Allan (1979; 1977a) concentrated on these relationships. His work (1990; 1989; 1979; 1977a) raises four important theoretical issues for sociological research on sisters: first, he attempts to define the sibling relationship; secondly, he examines class differences in sibling relationships; thirdly, he distinguishes between obligation and choice in kinship and friendship ties; and fourthly, he contrasts the emotional or psychological benefit of friendship with its social utility.

Allan's attempt to define the sibling relationship represents a departure from the wealth of research on sibling rivalry and the psychological effects of birth order. His focus on patterns of frequency of interaction between adult siblings which he termed 'sibling solidarity'[30] or 'informal contact' led him to a far more precise definition than existed previously in the literature: 'Sibling interaction generally involves little more than chatting and being friendly on occasion, often in a group setting.' (Allan 1977a:181). He contrasts this type of tie with 'special' or 'best friend' siblings. He found that relationships with siblings endure and that class and gender are significant in relationships with high compatibility. He also found that working-class siblings had strong ties with one sibling, usually same sex and closest in age: with this 'best friend' sibling the emphasis is on enjoyment rather than chat for the sake of keeping up contact. Another feature of the 'special sibling' is their importance in the respondent's network:

> Without exception, these siblings were recognised by the respondents as being the most important people in their social network, and were frequently described as their 'best friends' despite the general inappropriateness of this label for kin relationships. (Allan 1977a:181)

These 'best friend' sibling relationships were especially striking since the working-class respondents identified their main non-kin companions as 'mates' or 'not really friends'. Allan (1979) notes that similar relationships with sisters did not appear to exist among the middle-class respondents, although there was some evidence that they still saw their relationships with their sisters as 'like friendships' - albeit not special or very close ones.

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30 The term 'sibling solidarity' also appears in Gold's study (1987) on the role of the sibling relationship in later life.

Allan's definition of sibling relationships as either 'solidarity' or 'best friends' paved the way for subsequent sociological research on friendship and kinship. The concept of sociability or 'maintaining contact for its own sake' (Allan 1977a) has been seen as a key aspect of many friendships especially in relation to gender differences (Hays 1988; O'Connor 1987; Fischer 1982): male friendships tend to be characterised by sociability or shared activities whereas female friendships tend to be distinguished by intimacy and confiding (O'Connor 1992). Allan was also innovative in using a range of measures to define the sibling relationship - contact rates and visiting patterns on the one hand, and respondents' own perceptions of what was *relevant* in their relationships on the other. Influenced by Allan I too collected data on contact patterns between sisters.

Allan (1977a) found that class and gender played an important role in compatible sibling relationships[31]. Seven of the 19 working-class respondents had 'strong and significant' relationships with one of their siblings. Interaction between sisters tended to take place in the home. In 8 of the 9 cases of working-class respondents with 'special' sibling relationships, the siblings lived within ten miles of each other. He describes the main class difference between the working and middle-class siblings in his sample in relation to their involvement:

> While 5 of the middle-class respondents [out of 22] had a relationship with a sibling that was characterised by a higher degree of compatibility and positive affection than was usual, these respondents were not as involved with their siblings as were the above working-class respondents. (Allan 1977a:182)

Siblings were far less central to the middle-class respondents' social lives with less frequent interaction, than was the case for the working-class respondents.

The third aspect of Allan's work that has contributed to theorising about sibling friendship is the distinction between its obligatory and voluntary aspects, notions traditionally employed in order to distinguish kin from non-kin relationships. As Allan's study (1977a) illustrates, sibling or brother-sister, and I would add, sister relationships combine elements of both obligation and choice. O'Connor (1992) raises two questions in relation to the duty/choice idea. How useful is it for thinking about kinship and friendship ties? And are kinship and friendship similar enough that they can be substituted for one another? Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993; 1990) theorise the voluntary aspect of kin relationships: they locate kin relationships in a structural context and also consider the individual as an active participant in the construction of that world within their own social

31 See also Allan (1977b) for class variations in friendship patterns.

setting. Finch is concerned with the 'social meaning which these [kin and other relationships] give to individuals' lives' (Finch 1989:236). Finch's work demonstrates the conditional, negotiated and often ill-defined nature of kinship ties. It raises the possibility that friendship like kinship is negotiated with particular expectations about commitment, intimacy, reciprocity or the setting of interaction. Other aspects include time and the level of confidences. Work of this type however has not been done on friendship or sister relationships (O'Connor 1992).

The similarities between kin relationships and friendships can be obscured by generalisations about the obligatory aspect of kin relationships as opposed to the voluntary aspect of friendship (O'Connor 1992:153). Allan (1989) shows how the idea that we 'choose' our friends is a myth: social factors such as class, ethnicity and age help to shape who our friends are[32]. He critiques the idea of personal choice in friendships and is interested in developing a sociology of friendship stressing the way that it is socially constructed. Several similarities exist between sister relationships and friendships: one is intimate confiding and especially the use of the sister idiom to indicate 'fictive kinship' within friendships (O'Connor 1992:157). Sister relationships are also less institutionalised or regulated than parent-child relationships in Western society (O'Connor 1992; Allan 1989) and this partly explains why they are difficult to theorise. As early as the 1960s, Firth *et al.* (1969) noted that they represented the choice element of the kinship system where women could negotiate the type of interaction and quality of contact which they have. The concept of negotiation which in my research is linked to that of power relations is one of my study's key theoretical aspects which I return to in Chapter II.

Lastly, Allan (1989) distinguishes between the emotional or psychological aspects of kinship and friendship and its social utility. His interest in the social significance of friendship networks in relation to unemployment and the informal economy (Allan 1990), for example, extends beyond theorising friendship in terms of a personal relationship which meets individual needs (Allan 1989). This raises two questions which I return to throughout the study: first, the extent to which sister relationships have an entrenching or liberating effect on women in terms of their position in the social structure; and secondly, the role of the sister relationship in women's narratives of self or construction of their own subjectivities. Allan's distinction between 'sibling solidarity' and 'best friend siblings' has influenced the terms that I have used to distinguish between what I am calling *companionship* and *best friendship* in my typology (see Chapter IV). Next, I turn to the influence on the current study of O'Connor, Oliker and Hey's research on best friendship.

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32 One example is Jerrome's study (1984) of the 'Tremendous Ten', a friendship group of 11 middle-aged middle-class women brought together by their class and age.

Pat O'Connor: married women's very close relationships

Until the mid 1970s, friendship and female friendship attracted little attention. Since then, there has been a general review of the sociology of friendship (Allan 1990; 1989), an overview of research on female friendship and on young women's friendship groups (Griffin 1994; O'Connor 1992). In her London study of married women's friendships which mentions sister relationships, O'Connor (1987) found that for half her sample of 60 lower middle-class women, their most intimate relationship was with a sister. O'Connor's focus on the patterns and processes of maintaining 'very close relationships', including intimacy and talk, bridges the gap between kinship and friendship studies. She found that very close sister-sister ties were less based on practical help or on-going dependency than equally close relationships with mothers. The relationships between very close sisters had a high level of 'primary quality' (O'Connor 1992:159) defined as intimacy and solidarity[33] more usually associated with friendship. More than two-thirds of the close sisters had a high level of intimate confiding compared with less than one in five of the women's mothers who were identified as very close. Similarly, the majority of the women's relationships with their sisters had a high level of 'primary quality' compared with half of those with mothers that were identified as very close.

However, the existence of sisters does not guarantee their closeness (O'Connor 1990). There was some evidence that husbands' minimal involvement in child care could foster closeness between working-class women in particular (O'Connor 1987). Nevertheless, a significant finding to emerge was that only two-fifths of those who had a sister saw them as very close, a trend almost identical to that among Allan's working-class respondents (1979). Moreover O'Connor's focus on 'intimate confiding' as a process that constructs sister relationships has influenced my creation of the more general concept of 'talk' in my study defined in Chapter II. O'Connor's study of 'very close relationships' contributes to theorising friendship through concepts such as companionship, intimacy, nurturing, attachment and solidarity at a specific stage of the lifecycle, adulthood, and during marriage and cohabitation (1987)[34]. Her analysis of the similarities between the content and quality of women's friendships with their sisters and with their friends reflects the relevance of these concepts to ties with both kin and non-kin. Thus, kin is not necessarily the main distinguishing feature of these relationships. Similarities between female friendship and

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33 Here O'Connor is using the term 'solidarity' as pertaining to intimacy in contrast with Allan's notion of a more distant and *sociable* tie.

34 See O'Connor (1992) for a review of research on women's friendship at other stages of the lifecycle including adolescence and old-age and in other marital situations including singledom, divorce and widowhood as well as marriage.

sister relationships emerge in other studies, especially through the concept of best friendship (Hey 1997; Oliker 1989).

Stacey Oliker and Valerie Hey: best friendship

Oliker (1989), in her study about married women's friends, found that although being a sister did not guarantee identification as a friend, a quarter of the 21 women in her sample named their sister as their best friend as compared with one-twentieth of those who identified a mother in this way. These best friendships were in many ways similar to those with unrelated best friends in terms of mutuality, intimacy, durability and commitment, although Oliker notes that they had longer histories and were often perceived as 'eternal' (1989:78). The idea of mutuality is relevant for understanding an important aspect of certain sister relationships and significantly is connected to gender: women 'are more likely than men to begin on a path in early adult life where they start to develop sets of reciprocal relationships with kin' (Finch and Mason 1993:176). Some of the reasons for this development of reciprocity, Finch and Mason suggest, are structural, to do with women's greater responsibility for childcare and domestic life and lack of financial independence. This idea of reciprocity among same-sex kin and non-kin pairs has implications for understanding the evolution of power relationships in sister ties (examined in Chapter VII). Similar connections between reciprocity and power relations are explored in a study about the creation of *Families of Choice* among same-sex couples in the lesbian and gay communities (Heaphy *et al.* 1997).

Hey (1997), in her detailed ethnography of the processes of best friendship among teenage girls, suggests that girls use the safety of these relationships to discuss the social relations of sex: they speculate on potential boyfriends, review past experiences and debate strategies to manage the sexual double standard. Hey (1997) looked at middle-class and working-class friendship groups of girls aged 11 to 14 in two London schools. Her analysis of schoolgirl friendship is pertinent for understanding sisterly bonds between girls and women marked by similar tensions and contradictions of heterosexuality, interdependence and hegemony or power relations between them. For Oliker and Hey, best friendship is a contradictory process where 'accommodation, survival *and* resistance' take place (Oliker 1989:170). I have been especially influenced by Hey's empirical application of post-structuralist concepts of discourse and subjectivity in conjunction with hegemony, and I examine these in the next chapter.

In a further friendship study, Wellman (1990) found that among his Toronto respondents, sibling relationships had many similarities to friendships in terms of sociability and emotional support, though siblings were more likely than friends to provide practical help.

These elements of sociability and support in close sister relationships were also significant among the elderly women in Hochschild (1973) and Jerrome's (1981) studies, for 'reducing aloneness... [providing] laughter more than comfort, conviviality more than the act of being needed' (Hochschild 1973:65).

Oliker and Hey's analyses of the process of best friendship and my reading and interpretation of the women's narratives that form the basis of my study have influenced my theoretical position. I return to *best friendship*, as one of several forms that sister relationships can take in my description and application of the typology to the data in Chapters IV and V. Other strands of the typology, such as the *shifting positions* and *positioned* discourses also partly stem from Hey's ethnography, and the post-structuralist aspect of this terminology is explored in the next chapter.

Other studies of sisters and siblings

Several elements of intimate relationships - talk, power relations[35], autonomy, connection and change - appear in three American non-academic studies of sister and sibling relationships (Sandmaier 1995; Fishel 1994; Mathias 1992). Fishel[36] (1994) compares sister and mother-daughter relationships in terms of connection and independence. Mathias[37] (1992) found that the most common feeling among the women whom she interviewed was ambivalence about their relationship with their sister at different stages of life, relationships characterised as fluid and changing. Her focus on emotions, sisters' private language, the paucity of sex talk among her sample, and 'the little mother syndrome' (Mathias 1992:107) influenced me in the field as I asked women about the extent of *body talk* between them, regarding health and the body. It also alerted me to one of the central themes of sisters' mothering work in my data analysis: the *positioned* discourse strand of the typology reflects this emotional and practical mothering that takes place among sisters.

Sandmaier[38] (1995) contrasts the ties between sisters - the role of talk, best friendship and the primacy of this bond in women's lives - with those between brothers and between siblings. Brothers tend to be more competitive and violent than sisters or sibling pairs (see Cicirelli 1982), carry out joint activities and talk about these, and compete for father love[39].

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35 Dunn (1993) refers to power relations, negotiation and reciprocity between young siblings; and see also McNamee's (1997) study on gendered conflicts over leisure and domestic space among teenage siblings.

36 Fishel's data consists of 150 questionnaires and a sub-sample of 50 interviews with women aged 18-82.

37 Mathias interviewed 75 women aged 15-87.

38 Sandmaier interviewed 80 brothers and sisters aged 26-79.

39 For links between sibling violence, masculinity and adult violence see Bennett (1990); Mangold and Koski (1990); Gully *et al.* (1981); Straus *et al.* (1980).

Sandmaier's (1995:190) reference to marriage as a turning-point in sibling relationships leading to a 'post-marital intimacy gap'[40] is vital. It coincides with Vaughan's (1987) episodic approach to heterosexual relationships - looking for moments of change - and confirmed the significance of stages and transitions in the sister relationship marked by life events which I picked up on when I designed my interview schedule and analysed my data (see Chapter VI).

4. Structural factors affecting sister relationships

Research highlights several factors responsible for the different types of ties that exist between sisters. Allan (1977a) cites contact patterns, geographical and social mobility; stage in the family lifecycle; age; compatibility; and liking for one another and for the sibling's spouse. This section reviews three structural factors that affect sister ties: age and lifestage; class and geographical proximity; and ethnicity.

Age and lifestage

Age and lifestage dominate the literature on siblings and sisters more than class and ethnicity. Age constitutes the main sampling criterion in my study, and together with life-stage structures my own work in three ways. First, the large number of studies on childhood and old-age inspired me to privilege the less explored decades of adolescence and adulthood, or girlhood and womanhood. Secondly, the plethora of psychological research on birth order[41] and the age gap signalled the importance of these themes which I approach from a sociological and post-structuralist perspective. In the studies of age and life-stage, and in my own study, I pursue the different 'positions' adopted by older and younger sisters. Thirdly, studies on elderly sisters situate my work in a generational context: the changes that can occur at the end of life with sisters deciding to care for each other or live together emphasise one of the main themes in my study regarding the changing aspect of sister relationships across the lifecycle.

Studies have examined specific age groups - infancy (Yeatman and Reifel 1992; Lobato *et al.* 1991; McFarland 1938), adolescence, adulthood and old-age. Work on infancy has been dominated by a developmental approach in psychology with a focus on the effects of birth order, age gap, conflict and sibling rivalry. Research on adolescence has centred on the psychological effects of elder sisters caring for younger siblings, sexual abuse and eating disorders. Some studies suggest that contact between siblings fluctuates over the lifecycle: sisters are intimate and closest to each other in adolescence and in the later years at the end of their lives, while adulthood is marked by more distance (Drummond 1991; Argyle and

40 See also Ross and Milgram (1982).

41 For an interdisciplinary approach to birth order see Sulloway's study (1996).

Henderson 1985). Sister relationships can remain important during adulthood, however. Research in sociology and psychology considers conflict - a recurrent theme throughout the lifecycle - and the role of marital status and lifestage on sister relationships.

In contrast with the dominance of psychology in research on infancy and childhood, the large literature on the role of the sibling relationship as a form of emotional support in elderly women has been mainly sociological (Avioli 1986). Only among the elderly has there been a clear recognition of the centrality of women's relationships with siblings and friends in their lives (O'Connor 1992). Far more research has been done on sisters at this lifestage than at any other. This work on gerontology and psychology rivals only that on the early years of sisters' lives in developmental psychology. The psychological literature on elderly sisters includes studies on sisters caring for their parents and sisters caring for each other. This focus on caring work is the most significant for my study. Both strands of caring - parental and sisterly - are concerned with 'willingness to care' among elderly sisters, a notion seen as the defining trait of kin relationships and also a feminist double-edged sword - a blessing and a bind. Prior to the 1980s there was a tendency to blur the difference between 'emotional caring' and 'practical tending'. This notion of obligation to care for kin is now being challenged in Western society (Finch and Mason 1990) and replaced, in some cultural groups, by the concept of negotiated responsibility (Mason 1996; Finch and Mason 1993).

Several American studies have focused on elderly sisters' emotional support and care for their parents, siblings and each other (Brody *et al.* 1989; Matthews *et al.* 1989; Matthews 1987). Although over three-fourths of older adults have siblings we know little about the actual and potential support they offer each other in middle and old age (Avioli 1986). Childhood experiences may bind or separate siblings: siblings usually separate geographically and psychologically as they grow up yet help when needed (Avioli 1986). Much of this research has explored contact patterns and changes in living arrangements among the elderly. Contact with siblings can take on new meaning in later life. Shared history of lifetime experiences makes this relationship unique in social networks: among siblings with positive relationships contact decreases loneliness and provides emotional support (Gold 1987).

While some studies show that siblings constitute an important source of support in later life, others report that interaction with siblings is not related to morale or loneliness. Support between older siblings depends on both the specific relationship and older adults' needs (Avioli 1986). Frequency of face-to-face contact is related to gender, marital status, geographic proximity, mutual confiding, and considering siblings close friends (Connidis

1989). Connidis found that sisters appeared no more likely than other dyads to be close friends or mutual confidants despite more frequent contact: thus, the concepts of 'mutual confiding' and of 'greater closeness' are not a given in spite of frequency of contact. In his study of older people's well-being, Cicirelli (1989) found that well-being depends on closeness or disruption in the sibling bond. He found that closeness to a sister for both men and women appeared to be related to less depression. Women's perceptions of conflict and indifference in their relationships with sisters for example seemed related to increased depression. The role of siblings in the support networks of single and childless elderly shows reciprocity between siblings and cousins (Ikels 1988). Predominant patterns of support included sister-sister and sister-brother households: geographical proximity accounts for the fact that sisters are more involved.

Sibling support may be instrumental in facing the problems of aging: next to adult children, siblings offer the best prospects for providing older adults with a permanent home (Avioli 1986). Research on alternative living arrangements to institutionalisation found that siblings are more likely to live with a sister than a brother, and women are more likely to live with sisters and men with friends (Chappell 1991; Borland 1987). Research on the sibling bond in old age increases our understanding of its significance for meeting older people's social and emotional needs.

Class and geographical proximity

The effects of class, geographical mobility, employment, access to resources, time, money and appropriate meeting places (public and private) have been well-documented in the friendship literature (O'Connor 1992; Allan 1989). The role of ethnicity however has received less attention except in the Northern Irish context (Allan 1990). All these factors can facilitate or limit the types of friendships that are possible, and the processes through which they are created (O'Connor 1992). One of the underexplored issues is the lack of theorising about class and race differences between women (O'Connor 1992).

Sociological research addresses class in two ways. Some studies examine class differences within their sample. For example, class trends failed to emerge in O'Connor's study (1987) of married women's friendships with sisters, mothers and friends, while Allan (1977a) found marked class differences in his early study[42]. Although working-class women were more likely than middle-class women to confide in their mothers, it is not clear to what extent class or geographical stability was the crucial variable (O'Connor 1987). Allan (1977a) found that closeness to siblings was likely to be greater among working-class than middle-class siblings. Gouldner and Symons Strong (1987) however, found that among

42 These contradictory findings could be owing to the small sample sizes in both studies.

their middle class respondents some sisters were best friends especially among the older women.

Studies consider the link between friendship and social structures (Allan 1989): anthropologists have examined friendship, especially structural issues, more than sociologists who have tended to focus more on individual issues rather than the social significance of friendship (Allan 1989; Leyton 1974). O'Connor's interest (1992; 1987) is in how friendship reproduces both class and marital structures. Hey (1997) presents a complex account of the intersections of class and race in the formation of girls' heterosexual subjectivities in their friendships. Her focus is on how girls' friendships 'coded and were entangled within the densities and intensities of social division' (Hey 1997:125).

In my own study, class features primarily in the diverse make-up of the sample which includes middle-class and working-class women: given the small sample size, I focus in my analysis on specific processes that socially construct these relationships - primarily gender and age.

Ethnicity

While researchers acknowledge how little we know about 'what goes on behind closed doors' in the family (Bernardes 1993; Hey *et al.* 1993), we know even less about the role of sister relationships in the lives of distinct ethnic groups of women. Some empirical work considers cultural diversity and family forms (Brannen *et al.* 1994) and other work highlights links between group closure in friendship, kinship and ethnicity (Hey 1997; Allan 1990; Shaw 1988; Larson 1982). While work has been carried out on black families, women and girls[43], the single black family has tended to be be pathologised[44]. Researchers have argued that the notion of the Western family is inadequate to capture the diversity of black and other ethnic minority families. Others have criticised the concept of the 'family' in general (Bernardes 1993; Segal 1983; Barrett 1980).

Work on black women's lives carried out by feminists has highlighted issues to do with racism, employment, the double burden, domestic violence and access to higher education (Edwards 1993c; Brah and Shaw 1992; Southall Black Sisters 1990). One study mentions the role of sisters-in-law in mothers' support networks following childbirth in Asian families in London (Woollett and Dosanjh-Matwala 1990). Work on black girls has

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43 See Southall Black Sisters (1990); Brah and Minhas (1985); Bryan *et al.* (1985); Khan (1979).

44 See Murray (1990); Bhavnani and Coulson (1986); Rainwater and Yancey (1967).

focused on education, attainment and career aspirations; teenage mothers; and second generation Asian teenagers[45]. Little attention has been given to sister relationships.

There is an exception which stems from the origins of the term *sisterhood* in the American Civil Rights movement when white women joined their black 'sisters' in the fight against racism: however, when the term was later appropriated by second-wave feminists according to Lugones and Rosezelle (1995), its roots in the resistance to enslavement were lost. I return to the political implications of the term *sisterhood* in the conclusion to the thesis. While my sample contains a proportion of working-class and black women, class and ethnicity do not constitute a significant part of the analysis: age and similarities between the participants are the primary focus.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the neglect of sister relationships in social research and its social invisibility. It has reviewed work in psychology and medicine before describing sociological research and structural factors relevant for understanding sister ties. Most research on sisters has been in developmental psychology. Sociological work has examined class differences between adult siblings and the importance of sister relationships in old age (O'Connor 1987; Allan 1977a). Recent studies suggest that sister relationship are becoming the kin relationship of choice where there is room for negotiation (O'Connor 1992).

Little work documents the processes and strategies that sisters use to maintain their relationships including 'talk' or 'shared understandings' and negotiations about contact (O'Connor 1992; Morgan 1990). Research on the effects of friendship highlights its positive effects on individual well-being rather than its social aspect (O'Connor 1992; Allan 1990). Its social implications have been little considered, especially the role of discourses generated in friendship in maintaining class and marital structures (O'Connor 1992). Studying the dynamics between sisters could shed light on other ties between women that are structured by differences in age and power, class and race (Mens-Verhulst 1993a).

Research has been more concerned with the individual effects of relationships - the link between friendship and well-being, support or attachment[46] - and the link between social factors (class, age, ethnicity, employment) and friendship than with the impact of relationships on social structures (Allan 1990). Studies have explored the effect of friendship on mental health including loneliness, self-esteem and psychiatric health. Individuals with high levels of support are likely to have better physical health; live longer;

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45 See Mirza (1992); Ghuman (1991); Phoenix (1991); Brah (1979).

46 See O'Connor (1987); Weiss (1974; 1969).

be less prone to alcoholism, suicide and mental illness; have higher levels of resistance to stress; and be better able to deal with transitions and reversals in life, such as pregnancy, unemployment, divorce and death[47].

The effect of relationships on social structures has received far less attention. Are women's friendships liberating forces or do they 'entrench [women] further in deference, powerlessness and in many cases, personal misery' (Whitehead 1976:198)? These issues have been addressed in the context of women's gossip, and young women and married women's friendships in relation to the public/private arena[48]. These studies suggest that female friendship maintains marital structures, while at the same time creating personal space and autonomy within them[49].

Two main themes stand out from this review of sociological work. The first is the *similarity* between kin and non-kin ties in terms of the type of relationship itself and how it is constructed through emotions, contact patterns, and demographic factors, rather than its biological or non-biological origin. In my distinction between different types of sister bonds, I have been influenced by contrasting notions of sociability based on friendliness, shared activities, and a loose association, and of best friendship based on intimacy, confiding, compatibility, positive affection, mutuality and commitment (Hey 1997; Oliker 1989; Allan 1977a). These notions of friendliness and best friendship are reflected in the first two strands of my typology: *best friendship*, and *close* and *distant companionship*.

The second theme concerns the difference between kin and non-kin ties regarding their social construction in terms of the expectation/obligation of 'willingness to care' (O'Connor 1992:153), for many a non-negotiable aspect of the biological bond. It is of particular relevance to the eldest sister and working-class girls who often take on aspects of the mothering role (Watson 1997; Adkins and Leonard 1993): although little documented in the literature, apart from Edelman's (1994) 'minimother' and Mathias' (1992) 'little mother syndrome', this notion of caring and mothering was influential in shaping my thinking. It eventually became incorporated in the *positioned* strand of the typology (see Chapter IV, section 5). Sisters' experiences of mothering work, a specific element of femininity, combine with their gendered location in the institution of the family where heterosexual

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47 See O'Connor (1991); Hobfoll and Stokes (1988); Fleming and Baum (1986); Cutrona (1984); Duck (1983); Brown and Harris (1978a; 1978 b); Walker *et al.* (1977).

48 See Oliker (1989); Gullestad (1984); Jones (1980). For non-empirical accounts see Orbach and Eisenbaum (1987); Raymond (1986); Faderman (1981).

49 Jerrome's study (1984) of middle age women suggests that these processes may apply across the lifecycle.

power relations make re-negotiation of this structural role difficult. Thus the family becomes a site of power struggles (Delphy and Leonard 1992).

In the next chapter, several ideas mentioned in this chapter reappear and are examined in a more conceptual way: power relations, the role of talk in constructing emotional bonds, and subjectivity - or the self's movement or lack of movement within the constricting or supportive tie that exists between sisters. Chapter II focuses on these concepts and the theoretical sources of my study.

Chapter II

Conceptual Framework

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Conceptual Framework

Introduction

Empirically, my study is located at the juncture between sociological research on kinship and on friendship. Conceptually, I have drawn on three bodies of work to develop my theoretical framework: feminist standpoint theory; feminist post-structuralism; and auto/biographical work in sociology as an approach to the method of collecting and analysing life histories. I reflect on each of these before addressing the epistemological tensions that arise from combining these two contradictory theories and this method of auto/biographical work. Lastly, I describe the three concepts of power relations, gendered talk and subjectivity that emerge from these theories and which have contributed to my development of the typology (set out in Chapter IV). The first part of the chapter concentrates on these concepts as abstract notions as they have evolved theoretically; in the second part, I analyse these concepts in empirical studies where they are operationalised.

1. Tool-box theories

In this chapter, I draw links between my theoretical framework, feminist epistemology and ontology *and* the concepts derived from the theoretical literature which I applied to my data analysis. Conceptually, I have drawn on feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism. I have also been influenced by auto/biographical work in sociology as a method to provide a conceptual link between the individual and the social, between subjectivity and discourse. Each perspective embodies a range of positions available for collecting and interpreting women's narratives of self as sister.

In spite of claims made for a *feminist theory* 'at its best when it reflects the lived experience of women, when it bridges the gap between mind and body, reason and emotion, thinking and feeling' (Tong 1992:237), the general consensus among feminist thinkers is that there is no single feminist epistemology (Griffiths 1995). In addition, the different 'complex and evolving' feminist theories are difficult to classify (Maynard 1995:261). For this reason I adopt and combine ideas from two different theories even if these do not easily coexist: an 'eclectic project' (Maynard 1995) and a creative process known as a 'toolbox approach' (Ball 1994:14).

This chapter presents a retrospective account of the key aspects of my theoretical framework as it evolved during the stages of data collection and analysis. It was only in the phase of writing up that the way that the different pieces fitted together became clearer. My conceptual framework developed through the process of understanding the research and in interaction with the data. The position described here is the one I arrived at gradually as I analysed and wrote up the data. This end-point was reached through an inductive and a deductive process.

When I defined the different tenets of each theory in terms of ontology, epistemology, methodology and method, the link between my readings and reflections on theory and the way that I carried out the research and designed the methods became explicit. During the fieldwork stage the link had remained implicit. For example, I was gradually able to refine and connect my thinking about a significant aspect of my study, the influence of auto/biographical work in sociology, to the two theories that constitute my conceptual framework. Originally, I assumed these three bodies of work to be distinct theories. As I analysed and wrote up the data I realised that standpoint theory had primarily influenced the methodology of my study; auto/biography, my approach to collecting and analysing the data; and both standpoint theory and post-structuralism, my epistemological and ontological positions.

Feminist standpoint theory

My work is situated within a feminist theoretical framework[1]: feminist theory allows women's gendered subjectivity and the sister relationship to be placed at the centre of women's lives[2]. Standpoint epistemology is defined as grounded in Marxist materialist concepts of class and economy (Stanley and Wise 1990). At the level of ontology, I have been influenced by Dorothy Smith's (1988) materialist feminist standpoint theory that centrally locates 'ideology', as well as by Liz Stanley and Sue Wise's *fractured foundationalism* that upholds the idea of 'overlapping... material realities'[3]. Foundationalism is the 'insistence that "the truth" rather than a number of truths, exists independently of the knower' (Stanley and Wise 1990:41). Stanley and Wise, who draw on Durkeim's philosophy based on the existence of a material reality 'out there', espouse a revised version of foundationalism, hence their qualification of it as 'fractured'. This means that a truth independent of the knower exists, as well as these 'overlapping...material realities' (Stanley and Wise 1990:41).

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1 See Maynard (1994); Stanley and Wise (1983); Ramazanoglu (1989a; 1989b); Edwards (1990).

2 See Maynard (1995); Maynard and Purvis (1994); Mies (1983).

3 This is an idea that Stanley and Wise (1990:41) borrow from Gross (1987). See also Stanley and Wise (1993:194).

The emphasis placed on 'ideology', an independent truth, and these 'material realities' in standpoint theory is crucial for understanding women's lived experiences. The epistemological implication of this position is that knowledge can be produced out of women's material experience, including their emotions (Ramazanoglu and Holland 1997; Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Maynard 1994). Thus what is important about standpoint theory is the 'materialist conception of knowledge underlying the idea of a standpoint'. As Bubeck explains:

> ...the standpoint of the oppressed social group has epistemic privilege in that it is based on an experience, and therefore ultimately knowledge, of social reality which is less distorted and more immediately a reflection of social conditions or even human nature than that of the oppressors. (Bubeck in press:2)

During the research process, according to standpoint theory, the concern with documenting women's lived experience requires particular attention to both methodological issues and the methods adopted. A prime focus is with gaining information from women's own perspectives and addressing their own subjectivities during fieldwork and the data analysis stage (see Chapters III and IV for detailed descriptions of each). A parallel focus is with the researcher's own subjectivity or reflexivity seen as crucial to the study design:

> To achieve a feminist standpoint one must engage in the intellectual and political struggle necessary to see natural and social life from the point of view of that disdained activity which produces women's social experiences instead of from the partial and perverse perspective available from the 'ruling gender' experience of men. (Harding 1987:185)

In order to address these methodological issues, participatory methods during fieldwork and data analysis are considered to be valuable tools (Rheinharz 1992). Indeed, Smith (1988) highlights the involvement of women as participants in the research process in the active construction and interpretation of the social processes and social relations that constitute their lives. In practice, such a participatory approach presents more challenges during the analysis than the fieldwork stage and I return to these in Chapter IV.

One of the strengths of standpoint theory is the argument that women's experiences offer a different perspective of the world: this is Smith's idea of 'situated' knowledge which is socially and historically located (Smith 1974:11). Another strength is its acceptance and recognition of other 'silenced' standpoints such as black feminist and lesbian epistemologies (Stanley and Wise 1990).The main influences of standpoint theory in my study have been in relation to ontology, epistemology and methodology (see Table 1). The main concepts

which I incorporate in my work deriving from empirical research designed according to standpoint theory are those of *power relations* and *negotiation*. These concepts are described in the second half of this chapter.

Table 1: Feminist Standpoint Theory

	Feminist Standpoint Theory
Ontology	Material and ideological structures and mechanisms
Epistemology	Knowledge produced from experience
Methodology	Concern for women and researcher's subjectivity
Method	Participatory methods

Feminist post-structuralism

The second strand of feminist theory that I have drawn on is feminist post-structuralism. Postmodern ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault and Derrida's post-structuralism have had a considerable impact on feminist theorising. I use the term 'post-structuralism' rather than 'postmodernism', although the terms are often used interchangeably, to distinguish between the work of postmodern writers such as Lacan, Lyotard and Baudrillard and the post-structuralism of Derrida and Foucault which has been far more influential in feminist theory (Maynard 1995). Feminist theory has seized on many ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-structuralism to expand knowledge about language, desire, sexuality and the body (Maynard 1995; 1993)[4]. While this new development in feminist theory has been criticised on a number of levels (Maynard 1995; Jackson 1992), some elements are useful for developing a conceptual framework for interpreting my data.

I have been influenced by post-structuralism ontologically and in this regard I examine the centrality of narrative and discourse in constituting 'reality' through language. Secondly, I explore the epistemological implication of this position for understanding how knowledge is created from narratives produced by the speaking subject: the main concept here is subjectivity. Researching subjectivity in the field and analysing it in the data raised a number of methodological issues which are discussed in Chapters III and IV. At the level of method, I consider the role of auto/biographical work in sociology which I used to collect and analyse life histories in the next section of this chapter.

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4 Early feminist postmodernists influenced by the philosophy of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida include the French deconstructionist thinkers Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva: their particular interest was in reinterpreting Freudian psychoanalysis (Tong 1992).

The first idea that I have adopted from feminist post-structuralism is *discourse*, a notion which interweaves both power relations and language (Jones 1993; Weedon 1987). While discourse and subjectivity, which I turn to below, are contested terms that are difficult to define (Francis 1996), *discourse analysis* can be defined: it includes four different types of work (Potter and Wetherell 1994). The first is primarily linguistic and concerns conversation analysis in specific settings. The second is psychological, to do with discourse processes in relation to recall and understanding. The third stems from the sociology of science and scientists' construction of their work as rational. The fourth draws on continental social philosophy, cultural analysis, semiology, and history, especially the work of Michel Foucault. Psychologists, sociologists and researchers in cultural studies[5] 'have tried to show how institutions, practices and even the individual human subject itself can be understood as produced through the workings of a set of discourses' (Potter and Wetherell 1994:47). In this sense, discourses can be defined as ways of 'representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic' (Hall 1992:291) and of 'thinking and talking about the world which are informed and directed by the play of power', creating and setting 'limits to the "truths" by which we live and understand the world' (Holland 1996:24).

This last strand of discourse analysis is the one that I adopt in my study, specifically in the context of discourses prevalent in the family. This strand does away with the dichotomy between thought and action, language and practice (Hall 1992). My use of the term 'discourse' draws on the work of Michel Foucault, Wendy Hollway (1989; 1984) and Liz Frazer (1988a;b). According to Foucault (1980; 1977; 1972), a discourse can be produced by many individuals in different institutional settings (including families) and constructs positions where individuals become the subject of that discourse (Hall 1992). Discourses become dominant and can be overlapping and contradictory (Francis 1996). Moreover, power and knowledge are embedded in discourse through the production of subjects and objects. As Francis explains (1996:16): 'As the self is not coherent, but is positioned and positions in multiple, shifting discourses [...] discourse analysts study spoken and written texts, in which discursive constructions can be identified.'

The Foucauldian concept of discourse incorporates practice: from this perspective language or talk is important, in that subjectivity is primarily experienced and constructed through talk. The process of the construction of subjectivity also involves material structures and social experiences, including relationships (Maynard 1995), emotions, and what de Lauretis calls 'habits' and 'practices' that construct experience (de Lauretis 1984:182-3). Hollway's (1989) definition of discourse is useful in the way that she links it to agency and emotions.

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5 See Hey (1997); Epstein (1993); Walkerdine (1990); Hollway (1989); Frazer (1988a); Henriques *et al.* (1984).

She outlines four competing discourses for understanding heterosexuality - a male sexual drive discourse, a have/hold traditional Christian discourse, a permissive discourse and a feminist discourse[6]. She writes about the notion of *investment* that men and women have in certain positions rather than others, a useful idea which sheds light on why we become positioned or let ourselves be positioned in discourses that are damaging to us. In her description of the *seductions* to which we are exposed and succumb with ambivalence, Jane Miller echoes Hollway's idea of *investment*: 'In trying to do justice to the complexities of women's seductions into ways of life, behaviour, beliefs and traditions which have the potential to undermine them, I have wanted to portray seduction as both multifaceted and diverse' (Miller 1990:23).

Frazer's (1988a; 1988b) application of the term 'discourse' in her empirical work also derives, like Foucault's use of the term, from language, talk and speech: she uses it in the sense of 'interpretive repertoire' in her work on schoolgirls' understanding of femininity. She opts for discourse in the place of traditional definitions of ideology which fail to account for the variety of 'ideological positions' available to teenage girls or for the extent to which resistance to certain ideas is possible. Frazer found that girls' varied discourses about class, gender, race and their social world depend on their access to different institutionalised discourse registers[7]. These registers both enable girls to frame their experience but can also constrain their analysis of it. Her data reflect the experience and constraints of girlhood, especially the impact of local conditions and practices on girls' struggle over meaning - the way that girls attempt to resist 'dominant meanings' or contested ideas as well as the way that they negotiate through different practices and accounts (Frazer 1988a:190). Frazer's interest in institutionalised ways of talking, their use by subjects and their role in constructing experience is relevant for understanding the way that women as sisters experience their relationships and position each other in contradictory ways.

The girls in Frazer's study identified dominant meanings of femininity, gender and social forces which they saw propelling them in certain directions and which they were determined to resist. They used a multiplicity of conceptions of femininity, switching between them according to the context. The contrasting definitions they employ reflect elements of opposite discourse registers. Girls employ, resist or reject discourse registers according to already known (learned) conventions and notions of appropriateness.

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6 Unfortunately, Hollway (1989:54) does not provide further detail of the feminist discourse.

7 Frazer borrows the term discourse register from socio-linguistics where registers like the 'legal register' or the 'classroom register' have long been studied (1988a:192). She contrasts the 'tabloid press' register versus the 'feminist' register as well as the different 'dialects' used depending on the context. She identified three registers (1988a:194): i) the tabloid journalism register; ii) the 'feminist' or 'critical' style of talk; and iii) two forms which oppose the critical register - individualism and conservatism/traditionalism.

Discourse registers are visible, limited to specific institutions and social groups, include the public and institutionalised, and allow for a plurality of registers. Crucially, they enable the reintroduction of agency. They also highlight the way that meaning is produced, perpetuated and struggled over overtly[8].

Frazer's work is a useful example of an attempt to grapple with the term 'discourse' empirically. From the ontological point of view, it also shows how discourse is not limited to an existence solely in the realm of the ideal as opposed to the material. The girls in her study struggle over dominant meanings that exist both at the level of discourse and also take a material form in terms of their classed position. One of several criticisms directed at discourse analysis concerns the attention paid to language at the expense of an analysis of material power (Francis 1996). In general I would agree with this point. However, in Frazer's sociological research and Hey's (1997) ethnographic study of girls' friendships (which draws on theories from cultural studies), class and gendered power relations as material forces retain a strong presence. In my own study, material forces manifest themselves through power relations and emotions which I return to in the second part of this chapter.

Francis (1996) raises four other difficulties with discourse analysis: three to do with interpretation and representation, and one to do with the issue of validity. First, she says, discourse analysis 'closes' texts rather than opening them up to different readings. My analysis of my data in terms of the two discourses present in the typology (*positioned* and *shifting positions*) does not imply that these are the only two discourses present: other readings would doubtless lead to different interpretations. Secondly, she points out the unequal power relationship between researcher and participants, with the researcher dissecting participants' speech/text and finding or making knowledge from their words. This process, however, is an inevitable aspect of any data analysis and the dilemmas I encountered in my own approach to analysing the data are discussed further in Chapter IV.

Thirdly, there is the question of the researcher going beyond the text during the work of interpretation. This is precisely the task of transforming experience and text into sociology (Smith 1988) and is not specific to discourse analysis. Dilemmas of interpretation and representation are highlighted at the end of Chapter III (see section 7) and examined in detail in Chapter IV. Lastly, there is the issue of validity: Francis reflects on the inappropriateness of applying discourse analysis findings to different contexts, thus

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8 Although Frazer highlights the weakness of this approach, its behaviourism and by-passing of the 'cognitive' (1988a:199), its strength for my study lies in her depiction of active forms of feminine subjectivities, in a specific site - the school.

limiting the generalisability of the work. But one of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to shed light through detailed focus on processes in a specific context: while generalisability is not a principal aim the processes examined may resonate with other samples of similar subjects (Hey 1997).

The second idea in addition to discourse that I have adopted from feminist post-structuralism is gendered *subjectivity* or what one 'perceives and comprehends as subjective' (de Lauretis 1984:159). For de Lauretis (1984:159), subjectivity is an 'on-going construction not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world'. Subjectivity refers to our sense of personal identity 'produced within the discourses in which it is positioned and positions itself' (Griffiths 1995a:227). Here I examine subjectivity in terms of its theoretical exposition in the literature. At the end of the chapter, in my discussion of the theoretical concepts used in my study, I consider subjectivity as it is applied in empirical studies. Both formulations of subjectivity - theoretical and its empirical application - contributed to my conceptualisation of subjectivity in my research.

Before I define my own use of the term subjectivity, I want to highlight the contribution of post-structuralist work in understanding the *subject*. Their deconstruction of the 'subject-as-agent' allowed an understanding of the subject as a *position* within a particular discourse (Henriques *et al.* 1984:203): the power/knowledge relations which produce a subject position imply that there is no necessary coherence to the multiple sites where subject positions are produced, and these positions themselves might be contradictory.

> ..the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations. (Henriques *et al.* 1984:117)

These multiple positionings correspond to a multiplicity of subjectivities in the public and private worlds of women - as workers, consumers, mothers, and sisters. Henriques *et al.* call for the need to specify the different *practices* in which different subject positions and power relations are played out. Another insight lies in the importance of the experience of having more or less power in different social practices, what Henriques *et al.* (1984:118) term the experience of contradictions in subjective positionings or 'contradictory subjectivity'. This approach starts from a triad of power, knowledge and subject in place of the traditional society/individual dualism.

Feminist post-structuralists such as de Lauretis (1984) and Alcoff (1988) have seized on this early work on the deconstruction of the subject and expanded it in order to reinstate the presence of agency. De Lauretis (1984) develops a sophisticated notion of subjectivity

linked to experience and agency which Alcoff (1988) combines with the concept of *positionality*. My own working definition of subjectivity derived from feminist post-structuralism includes both language or *gendered talk* and experience, experience rooted in both constant motion or change (emotions, for example), and in positionality or the different ways in which women are positioned and position themselves in a network of relations based on economic, cultural and political conditions (Alcoff 1988). I concur with Flax (1990) and Maynard's (1995) understanding of the self, subject and subjectivity as changing and made up of desires and emotions yet retaining consistent elements, for example, the ability to think rationally. Thus this form of subjectivity can embrace agency and an ability to act on and in the social world: hence the use of the term 'agentic subjectivity' (Maynard 1995:274).

Several feminist post-structuralists have explored the construction of feminine subjectivity through discourses of domination and power in the realms of schooling, the family and sexuality (Holland *et al.* 1998; Hey 1997; Rossiter 1994; Walkerdine 1990). Hey's (1997) ethnography of girls' friendships echoes Frazer's (1988a) account of the coexistence of contradictory forces and practices in girls' ability to reflect and conceptualise their experience[9]. Hey found that girls' best friendships can be both positive and negative encompassing both nurturing aspects and 'bitchiness', especially girls' surveillance and controlling of each other[10]. Other feminists have focused on the way that girls can occupy shifting positions of power in terms of subject/object and active/passive positions in dominant discourses of femininity and heterosexuality in the construction of their own subjectivity (Jones 1993; Walkerdine 1990).

The strength of these studies lies in their analysis of simultaneous processes of acceptance and resistance of dominant discourses by 'the subject' which contributes a social and structural dimension to the relational psychologists' work[11]. As Epstein, who also uses the term 'active agent', explains:

> ...we may occupy positions within different and contradictory discourses, being at one and the same time, in positions of relative power and relative powerlessness. [...] ...power is not always wielded through coercion, but often through discursive practices which people, as active agents within these practices either consent to or resist. (Epstein 1993:13)

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9 Holland *et al.* (1988) provide a complex account of the role of both experience and reflection (or intellectual knowledge) in young women's struggle with and resistance to gendered power relations in the process of hetero/sexual empowerment.

10 Hey (1997) and Lees (1993; 1986) illustrate the way that teenage girls 'police' each other through language.

11 See Brown and Gilligan (1992); Gilligan *et al.* (1990).

This leads me to two elements which feminists have brought to post-structuralism, and implicitly two shifts in current feminist theory. First, there has been a move away from positioning women as a group oppressed by a system or structure (patriarchy): this opens up a space for resistance, struggle, action and agency or 'contradictory relations' (Maynard 1995:271). Secondly, there has been a move away from focusing on oppression alone to looking at the unevenness of power, exemplified by Epstein's words above, especially the way that women and girls 'are variously positioned in specific contexts' - the classroom, the family (Maynard 1995:271). Walkerdine (1994; 1990) and Hey's (1997) work in school and on the margins of school sheds light on girls' multiple and fragmented positions in and outside the classroom, thereby transcending reified explanations which polarise agency and structure.

The main influence of feminist post-structuralism on my theoretical framework has been at the levels of ontology and epistemology in relation to all three concepts, power relations, language and subjectivity, explored later in the chapter. Table 2 indicates the significance of elements of post-structuralism relevant in this study. Next, I consider the way that I was influenced by auto/biographical work in sociology in order to develop a method with which to gather and interpret life stories of women's experiences of power relations and their changing subjectivity in their relationships with their sister/s.

Table 2: Feminist Post-structuralist Theory

	Feminist Post-structuralist Theory
Ontology	The ideal/idealism created through language; text, discourse, narrative
Epistemology	Knowledge produced from narratives by speaking subjects
Methodology	Deconstructionist approach to taken for granted assumptions
Method	Auto/biography/life histories, link between the material and the ideal through personal narratives

Auto/biographical work in sociology

Feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism provide the epistemological foundation for the three main concepts that I have developed in order to analyse the data: power relations and negotiations, discourse or gendered talk, and subjectivity. Auto/biographical work in sociology offers a method[12], drawing on the strengths of both theories, which incorporates and weaves together changes in individual subjectivity and in

12 This reference to method is a way of distinguishing between method, methodology, epistemology and ontology in the research process.

social structures. I have used the method in two ways: as a way of conceptualising, analysing and interpreting women's narratives of relationship described here, and in an applied manner in the field, described in the next chapter.

Until recently auto/biography[13] and biography have been viewed as two separate activities: some sociologists have questioned this division and consider that the two are intermeshed and cannot be separated (Stanley 1993; 1987)[14]. I have used the auto/biographical method in order to explore stories of the construction of complex subjectivities, rather than to present a 'true' representation of lives (Stanley 1993). This method has enabled me, as it has done for others, to place subjectivity, emotions, memory and analysis of experience, and the link between individual experience and social, political and familial processes, at the centre of personal accounts[15]. Steedman (1986) and Walkerdine (1990) both use auto/biography to explore subjectivity in a social context and critique merely chronological accounts. Steedman's (1986:6) historical account of her subjectivity, drawing on her mother's life and her own, is about the 'stories that people tell themselves to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit'. Walkerdine (1990:xiv) also aspires to tell those 'other stories' as does Plummer (1995:31, 35), who says about sexual stories that '...many stories whose nature at present we can only guess at, are not being told. [...] Many stories are in silence - dormant, awaiting their historical moment'. Sisters' stories are less heard than are other aspects of women's lives. Walkerdine's ideas (1990) about how we are formed by the fictions of femininity are pertinent for exploring sister relationships; she answers her own question about whether an 'authentic female voice' exists:

> For me the answer lies not, as some feminists have suggested, in some kind of essential feminine voice that has been silenced, but in that which exists in the interstices of our subjugation. We can tell other stories. (Walkerdine 1990:xiv)

One story told in the current study is that of changing feminine subjectivity in the context of the social and political institution of the family.

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13 Blair *et al.* (1995) distinguish between life-history, which is delivered orally, and auto/biography or the story of one's own life or a written account of someone else's.

14 One confusion about the term 'auto/biographical work' is whether it refers to either the researcher or the participant. As proponents of this approach stress, it refers to both and especially to the idea that both autobiography and biography are intertwined and inseparable (Stanley 1992), hence the slash in the term.

15 See Blair *et al.* (1995); Griffiths (1995b); Evans (1993); Ribbens (1993); Stanley (1992); Steedman (1992); Kippax *et al.* (1990). For accounts of the role of feminist autobiography in literature, see Gagnier (1991) and Friedman (1988).

A further aspect of auto/biographical writing concerns the methods used to describe what Walkerdine (1990:xiv) calls the journey or 'process of coming into being'. In her article about women's narration of personal experience in interviews, Riessman (1991) explores two different genres: the chronological and the episodic or thematic. The episodic complements the chronological and ties in with some of the theoretical aspects of post-structuralism: I have used both approaches to analyse the tensions in women's relationships with their sisters at a specific point and their constantly changing and multiple subjectivities over the years.

I have also used auto/biography as a method in the field for collecting personal life histories (Crapanzano 1984)[16]. Initially, I was influenced by auto/biographical work in sociology in terms of thinking about subjectivity, narratives and the insights to be gained from the private for understanding the social (Ribbens 1993). What remained a puzzle was the way that this aspect of sociological work related to my conceptual framework made up of feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism. Gradually, I realised its importance in my approach to fieldwork and to my data analysis (Mauthner 1997). I describe in more detail the way that I used it in an applied manner in Chapter III.

Drawing on these two theoretical perspectives as well as on the auto/biographical method for interpreting sisters' stories has yielded rich insights. Feminist standpoint theory allows women's gendered subjectivity and the sister relationship to be placed at the centre of women's lives (Smith 1988). Feminist post-structuralism enables specific moments in stories of relationships to be captured - a shift or a turning-point - while firmly locating these in the fluid, flowing and changing aspects of relationships (Hey 1997; Alcoff 1988; Vaughan 1987). Sociological work in auto/biography also helps trace the complex webs of relationships in which women's lives as sisters are enmeshed and the difficulties that ensue for participants *and* researcher when attempting both to 'tell their stories' and interpret them (Hamson 1995; Plummer 1995; Stanley and Morgan 1993).

My use of auto/biography in sociology as a method rather than a theory is rooted in two of the tenets of post-structuralism (Maynard 1995). The first is the move away from grand theories or meta-narratives to a focus, in contrast, on the social, understood to be in a continual state of process and flux. The second is the move away from foundationalism, defined as the assumption that theories need to be based on a fundamental core, to more emphasis placed on the pluralistic and multifaceted nature of women's position. In this sense, the auto/biographical method enables links to be made between the individual and the

16 Crapanzano (1984) distinguishes between 'life histories', a response to a request from an outsider, and 'autobiographies', accounts originating with the narrator.

social, subjectivity and discourse (see Table 3). Nevertheless, difficulties stemming from this weaving of auto/biography as a tool with feminist post-structuralism remain. A number of other tensions emerge from combining feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism in my theoretical framework which I turn to next.

Table 3: Auto/biographical Work in Sociology

	Auto/biographical Work in Sociology
Ontology	Reality as the material and the discursive
Epistemology	Knowledge produced from experience and narratives
Methodology	Concern for participants' and researcher's subjectivity
Method	Method for conceptualising, collecting and analysing women's narratives of relationship prior to, during and following fieldwork

Epistemological tensions

Epistemology concerns the context of the production of knowledge, the relationship between knower and would be knower and the question of what is knowable[17]. It corresponds to a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate (Maynard 1994). Writers agree that there is no single feminist epistemology owing to the pluralism of feminist theories and the 'anti-hegemony' of any one feminist discourse (Stanley and Wise 1990:47). However, commonalities do exist. All feminist epistemologies challenge modern, traditional or positivist epistemology which posits reality as a rational, completely knowable, transparent, accurate 'mirror of the mind' (Nash 1994:67).

In traditional sociology, knowledge is posited on a series of dualisms: reason/emotion, mind/body, subject/object, objective truth/ideology (Maynard 1994). Feminist epistemologies are concerned with women and girls; they all have a moral/political stance; values and power are organising concepts which precede epistemology and analysis starts at that point; facts are not objective or value-free; all address the disempowerment of women underpinned by other epistemologies; and all stress the importance of self or subjectivity (Griffiths 1995a).

As I am drawing on two contradictory epistemologies - feminist standpoint theory in the tradition of critical theory and feminist post-structuralist thought - certain tensions exist. The implications of bringing together these two theoretical perspectives are important for

17 See Maynard (1995); Guba and Lincoln (1994); Nash (1994); Alcoff and Potter (1993).

understanding the research process and especially the interpretation of the data. As mentioned above, the auto/biographical method that I adopt brings together, through language, the two discordant theories/epistemologies: experience, the material and the emotional on the one hand; subjectivity, discourse and narrative on the other.

I draw on a number of principles from standpoint theory (Smith 1988) in terms of my understanding of the site and production of knowledge. Standpoint theory holds the 'everyday world as problematic', women's views as particular and privileged, and the importance of the presence of the researcher's subjectivity and of reflexivity in the research process (Smith 1988). This theory enables me to justify the aim of my research to study a taken for granted relationship and invisible aspect of women's lives in the public realm, that of relationships between sisters. It also assumes that women's experiences, including their emotions and memories of these relationships are knowable (Kuhn 1995).

In the project of deconstruction on the other hand, and subsequently feminist post-structuralism, knowledge or reality is

> produced discursively, *within* a system of rules that govern what can count as a real object or process, or a 'true' or 'false' statement. Within such systems reason and experience are themselves no more than discursive constructions legitimating certain statements and denying others authority; they are seen as having no privileged access to an extra-discursive world. (Nash 1994:66)

In this paradigm, knowledge is equated with narrative or texts created through language, experience is always contextualised, and subjectivity is constructed and embedded in practices of social control. As Maynard adds: knowledge is produced by deconstructing 'the discursive practices through which the social world is portrayed' (Maynard 1995:269). Knowledge is thus produced from narratives.

Another vital element of Foucault's work and deconstruction for feminist theory is the connection between knowledge and the desire for control or power in modern societies (Nash 1994:68). The equation between knowledge and power is central to feminist theories, politics and, by extension, the interpretation of the data in my own study. One of the tenets of feminist theories and politics is that knowledge leads to empowerment: in this study, the context is that of the social construction of gendered feminine subjectivity in the heterosexual family and the extent to which women as sisters can or do rewrite their scripts. As Nash (1994:69) explains: '...knowledge positions subjects within certain discourses by enabling certain possibilities and excluding or repressing others'. My interest is in the link between knowledge, specific positive or negative discourses that operate around sistering

and the possibilities for resisting or embracing these[18]. Indeed, Alcoff (1988) sees discourses as enabling and as offering the possibilities for resistance, as well as constituting the currency through which power and control are mobilised. Maynard (1995:269) adds: 'The subject is presented as being divided against itself and as the product of conflicts and contradictions between its various parts and its positioning in various discourses'.

In feminist post-structuralism there is a tension regarding the space for the 'materiality of human existence' which becomes replaced by text or discourse (Maynard 1994:22). As Foucault says, '...the very act of speaking about experience is to culturally and discursively constitute it.' (Foucault 1981; 1986 cited in Maynard 1994:23). This turn towards culture - words, language, text, representation, and discourses - away from the material - economics, the sexual division of labour, and labour market - Maynard (1995) argues, marks one of the most significant developments in feminist theory in the 1990s. I concur with Maynard (1995:274) when she says: '...it is possible for feminism to hold on to some of the most helpful insights which are offered by Lacanian and post-structural perspectives, while at the same time retaining a commitment to some of its earlier tenets which have recently been challenged.' The earlier tenets that she refers to concern the material and the importance of experience.

I want to hold on to the importance of both the material reality of experience and emotion and the fact that they exist and are constituted through narrative and language. Language, the production of knowledge, the material and power relations are all inextricably linked. As Ramazanoglu and Holland (1997:5) succinctly put it: 'Language is the medium through which we can express knowledge of material conditions and power relations.' This tension between the lived, the material, and its representation through language is not easily resolved. I argue that, notwithstanding the epistemological tensions, there are many benefits from combining elements from both feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism with the auto/biographical method for researching women's lives as sisters.

2. Theoretical concepts

I have extracted three concepts from the two strands of feminist theory described above and auto/biographical work in sociology for analysing the processes underlying sister relationships. These include: power relations and negotiation, talk, and subjectivity. In this section I outline these concepts before displaying the typology which they contributed to in Chapter IV.

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18 I explore how the women themselves and I as researcher understood the sister experience in Chapter IV.

Power relations and negotiation

My understanding of discourse in the current study interweaves concepts of power relations, language, subjectivity, positioning and positionality (or agency). I use the concept of power relations and negotiation[19] in conjunction with other concepts of gendered talk and subjectivity in order to describe the complex processes that construct sister relationships both internally and in relation to other relationships (Holland *et al.* 1998). I apply this concept for theorising power both within sister relationships and between women as sisters with significant others such as sexual partners and mothers. Studies of the social construction of femininity reflect its disempowering aspects for women socially and psychologically: these studies highlight the need for resistance to this positioning if women are to be empowered (Holland *et al.* 1998; McRobbie 1991). By 'empowerment' I mean 'a collective project which shifts the balance of power between women and men throughout society' (Holland *et al.* 1991b:24). As Holland *et al.* argue 'empowerment remains a contested process and we recognise the categories of empowerment that we have used as unstable': the tensions and contradictions involved can make empowerment an ambivalent and shifting project, at times desirable and at other times, difficult.

I adopt a post-structuralist notion of power as diffuse and shifting in contrast to my original understanding of power relations as gendered and more fixed. My understanding of power stems from Holland *et al.*'s work on the location of power in multiple sites (Holland *et al.* 1998). Holland *et al.* identify four sites in which power is based: the first is at the level of language, ideas and discourses which corresponds to the *shifting positions* and the *positioned* discourses in my typology. Power is also located in individual agency and action, or what I am calling changing subjectivity in my study[20]. The third site is to do with structured, institutionalised power relations: in my study, this corresponds to the institution of the heterosexual family (Delphy and Leonard 1992). The last site where power comes alive is in embodied practices and experiences: in sisters' lives, this site manifests itself through the contact, emotions, joys and conflict between them. I have also been influenced by the Gramscian (1971) construction of hegemony in the private world which feminist writers have explored in relation to heterosexuality and homosociality (Hey 1997; Miller 1990). In the current study, hegemony takes the form of power relations between women, a less researched area than its heterosexual counterpart.

Prior to my fieldwork I was concerned with the ability of women as sisters to negotiate both their own relationships, in the form of contact between them, and with the link

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19 See Holland *et al.* (1998); Mann (1996); Griffin (1994); Hey (1995a; 1995b); Skeggs (1994); Edwards (1993b); Finch and Mason (1993); Holland *et al.* (1992); Frazer (1988a; 1988b).

20 Changing subjectivity is explored in Chapter VIII.

between this type of negotiation and an awareness of or 'resistance' to gendered power relations both inside and outside the household[21]. Influenced by friendship and kinship research, I was curious about whether sister relationships contribute to well-being and especially to 'political resistance'. Brown and Gilligan (1992)[22] use this term to refer to an awareness and ability to resist and challenge the social construction of femininity, motherhood and sexuality which structure women's lives[23]: they found that the girls who they defined as 'political resisters' often had close relationships with their mothers. Central to this notion of 'resistance' is the concept of talk, specifically gendered talk, which I turn to next. Then I consider the third concept of subjectivity where I abandon the notion of 'resistance' and exchange it for those of changing subjectivity and positionality.

Gendered talk

One reason for focusing on talk is because, as I illustrate in Chapters VII and VIII, it is partly through talk, as well as through silence and emotions, that subjectivity is constructed and experienced materially. Before describing findings from empirical research I explain my understanding and use of the term 'talk'. I am using the three terms 'discourse', 'language' and 'talk' in distinct ways: by 'discourse', I mean the structures of power and thought; 'language' refers to the medium of the word as text or utterance; language plays a key role in connecting experience, narrative of experience and knowledge. Lastly, by 'talk' I mean the practice of speaking. In conceptualising gendered talk, I have been influenced by Stanley and Wise's (1990) interpretation of Smith's (1988) outline of a sociology for women which refutes knowledge as expertise in favour of knowledge derived from women's experiences. Smith visualises a closer link between experience and knowledge where knowledge remains accessible to those who have contributed to its production:

> It [the new sociology] proposes discourse organised differently, where knowledge does not become a body of knowledge, where issues are not crystallised, where the conventions and relevances of discourse do not assume an independent authority over against its speakers and readers. It would have the capability of continually opening up a different experience of the world, as women who have not yet spoken now speak. Each speaker from a new site discloses a new problematic for inquiry. It is in this continually opening up that the sociology I have wanted has its home and sense (Smith 1988:222-3).

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21 For research on power relations in heterosexual relationships, see Holland *et al.* (1991b). For research on power relations in the family in the context of talk about health, see Holland *et al.* (1996).

22 I am grateful to Natasha Mauthner for drawing this aspect of Gilligan's work to my attention (see Mauthner 1994:160).

23 See Holland *et al.* (1991a); Phoenix *et al.* (1991); Thomson and Scott (1991).

An important aspect of Smith's work for my study is her broad understanding of 'text' which, unlike that of other thinkers, includes both the written and the spoken. In his philosophical work on hermeneutics, Ricoeur, for example, distinguishes between discourse, language and text: text is equated with writing rather than 'living speech' (1981:198). The importance of Smith's incorporation of both the written and the spoken in the notion of text is epistemological: fusing the two connects the production and the producers of oral and written narratives, in this case the women in my study and myself as researcher. This epistemological point is the one captured in Stanley and Wise's (1990:34) expression 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge' which derives from the above passage of Smith's. This phrase, 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge', succinctly and implicitly brings together the verbal or textual (language), the spoken or oral (talk) and abstract aspects of knowledge production (discourse). It reappears throughout the thesis where I use it to refer to both talk between sisters in contrast with silence, and the exchange of knowledge between them about their positionings in the two discourses of the typology, for example. Next, I consider empirical work carried out on talk.

Empirical work on talk illustrates its significance for the social construction of interpersonal relationships: 'relationshipping'[24] or 'doing' the 'social ideology of intimacy' (Montgomery 1988) through talk constructs and maintains social worlds and the discourses within them (O'Connor 1992). 'Talk' about interactions and interpretations of them has been a central concern in friendship and kinship studies[25]. This qualitative work has taken place within the context of women's friendships or the marital relationship. It is largely through talk, I argue, that subjectivity and relationships are constructed and experienced. I consider the role of gendered talk and 'body talk'[26] in constructing the female private world where relationships are 'managed' (Ribbens and Edwards 1995).

Research on gendered talk and female friendship highlights collaboration and intimate confiding as two features of girls' and women's talk[27]. Girls' friendships based on talk lead to specific conversation styles and verbal skills where they learn to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, criticise others in acceptable ways, and interpret accurately the speech of other girls (Maltz and Borker 1982). Their collaboration-orientated talk unlike boys' competition-orientated talk maintains distinct male and female styles of interaction which continue among adults (Coates 1993; Tannen 1991).

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24 I am borrowing Duck's (1991) term for the activity of self-disclosure.

25 See Morgan (1990); Finch (1989); Oliker (1989); McCall (1988); Gullestad (1984); Jerrome (1984).

26 This term is used in Holland *et al.* (1996).

27 For studies about gendered talk among children and teenagers in relation to topics discussed see Haas (1978); Eder and Sanford (1982).

The accomplishment of gender through talk, and of both of these through our participation in everyday social practice, is visible in differences in speech patterns (Coates 1996; Coates and Cameron 1988): women friends discuss certain topics for longer than men do, share information, self-disclose, and talk about their feelings (Coates 1993). Coates' focus on women in their 'speech communities' and her distinction between 'cooperativeness' and 'competitiveness' is relevant for analysing sister relationships (Coates 1988a; 1988b). 'Cooperative talk' or 'conversation where speakers work together to produce shared meanings' (Coates 1988b:118) is the joint working out of a group point of view which takes precedence over individual assertions and often includes mutual disclosure[28].

Intimacy or confiding is a further feature of talk between female friends (Hays 1988; Reis and Shaver 1988)[29]. Research on intimate confiding shows clear gendered patterns of intimacy and sociability[30]; women are particularly likely to have intimate confidantes[31]; mutual helpfulness is significant in most female friendships as opposed to the shared activities and similar interests most central to men's (Aukett *et al.* 1988; Weiss and Lowenthal 1975); and women use more non-verbal expressions of affection (Rands and Levinger 1979).

For women, intimacy involves admitting dependency, sharing problems and being emotionally vulnerable. Some sister relationships appear to be characterised by high levels of intimacy, 'primary quality' (O'Connor 1992:159) and highly positive interaction[32]. A study of girls' confiding patterns shows their preference for mothers and sisters as confidantes[33]. Mothers were usually the first named problem-solver whereas fathers were rarely cited. Fifteen to eighteen year-olds cited girlfriends as the most commonly cited intimate confidante, with mothers and sisters in second place. At 19 they were slightly more likely to name their boyfriend than their girlfriend or mother as intimate confidant.

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28 Coates (1988b) recorded an established group of white middle class friends in their late thirties and early forties over nine months who met once a fortnight at each others' houses in the evening to talk. One limitation of her work, which she admits, is that this notion of 'cooperative talk' needs to be tested against parameters of class, ethnicity and age.

29 For research on reciprocity as another feature of different types of friendships (commitment versus convenience; associative, reciprocal and receptive friendship where one partner is the main giver), see Fischer *et al.* (1977); Reisman (1981).

30 Helgeson *et al.* (1987) argue that men's definitions of intimacy in terms of proximity and shared activities protect them from situations of emotional vulnerability and potential loss of control.

31 See Derlega *et al.* (1986); Aries and Johnson (1983); Wright (1982); Bell (1981); Powers and Bultena (1976); Cozby (1973); Booth (1972); Komarovsky (1967).

32 See Aughingen (1990); O'Connor (1990); Allan (1979).

33 Monck (1991) interviewed and gave questionnaires to 142 girls aged 15-20 who scored high or low on measures of eating disorders.

More is known about mothers than sisters as confidantes for their daughters regarding both emotional and sexual issues (Brannen *et al.* 1994). Strong relationships between women, such as those between mothers and daughters and adolescent girls can protect and enhance psychological health (Hey 1997; Brown and Gilligan 1992). Research shows that talk about emotions and the body between mothers and daughters and between friends can contribute to intimacy, support or 'nurturing' and 'resistance'. Talking about the body and sexuality in its broadest sense plays an important role in intimate relationships between mothers and daughters and in girls' best friendships (Hey 1997; Fox and Inazu 1980a). Some mothers build on the continuity of open and general communication established with their daughters in childhood to discuss more sensitive issues with them as teenagers (Fox and Inazu 1980a).

How does 'body talk', or talk about the body not 'body language', construct sister relationships during and beyond the teenage years? Awareness of the body and issues relating to the body can enable girls and women to resist and challenge the social construction of femininity (Holland *et al.* 1991a; Thomson and Scott 1991). Do girls and women share information about the body with each other as sisters? Little is known about 'body talk' between sisters compared to other family relationships (Sharpe *et al.* 1996): sister relationships have largely been ignored in studies on family communication about sex[34]. Holland *et al.* (1996) found that while some mothers can talk relatively easily to children about the physical aspects of reproduction, they find it harder to discuss relationships and emotions. Outside the family[35], studies of same-sex friendship explore how teenage girls and boys talk about sexuality (Wight 1992; 1991).

Sisters can act as a source of information about sex and confidantes regarding menstruation, sexual and reproductive health decisions. The role of sisters in relation to issues such as menstruation, abortion, pregnancy and sterilisation can be significant. Prendergast (1989) found that the majority of teenage girls in her sample confided to their mothers followed by their friends and sisters about their first period. Teenage sisters tease each other about knowledge they do or do not have about periods, body changes and boyfriends and also affect each other's sexual initiation and childbearing decisions (Hey *et al.* 1993; Ortiz and Nuttall 1987). A review of the literature on teenage sexual initiation and childbearing decisions shows that the younger sisters of pregnant and parenting adolescents

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34 See Noller and Callan (1991); Allen (1987); Fisher (1987); Fox and Inazu (1980a; 1980b); Farrell (1978).

35 The literature on learning and talking about sex is mainly concerned with the provision of sex education at school including the divide between the formal and the hidden curriculum, the oppression and institution of heterosexuality, the sexual double standard and sexual harassment (Lees 1993, 1986; Halson 1989; Holly 1989).

are at increased risk for premature parenting (East and Felice 1992). Sterilisation decisions are also influenced by the experience of siblings (Thompson *et al.* 1991).

This distinction between 'discourse' or the structures of power and thought; 'language' or the word as text or utterance that plays a key role in connecting experience, narrative of experience and knowledge; and 'talk', the practice of speaking about emotions and the body; is significant for three reasons. First, it highlights the link between experience and language in the production of knowledge. Secondly, it illuminates the centrality of talk, and silence, in the emotional and material production of subjectivity and I return to this (see Chapter VII, section 5 and Chapter VIII, section 5). Thirdly, the social and sociological invisibility of sisters was reflected in a linguistic absence which posed a dilemma for carrying out fieldwork. My development of an appropriate language which draws on these distinctions is explored in the next chapter (see section 5, 'The dream of a common language'). In the next section, I define my use of the concept of subjectivity in the current study.

Subjectivity

Influenced by the theoretical writings of Alcoff (1988) and de Lauretis (1986) on subjectivity and Frazer (1988a) and Hey's (1997) empirical research on girls' subjectivities, my understanding of the feminine self as an active agent able to 'resist' certain subordinating practices and structures shifted. By subjectivity I mean:

> the ways in which a person gives meaning to themselves, others and the world [...]. It is characterised by tensions and instability because it is constituted through discourses which are often in contradiction to one another. (Davies and Banks 1992:2)

At the outset I was preoccupied with two ideas. The first concerned the effects of talk and of sister relationships as either 'liberating' or 'entrenching' in relation to social structures which formed part of my original research aims at the start of the study (1993-1995). The second early aim concerned the contradictory role of sister relationships in their narratives of self and in relation to their subjectivity. My assumption was that gender or femininity and female kin and non-kin influence the way that subjectivity is socially constructed as well as the way that women, as sisters, can redefine, and reconstruct subjectivity. I was interested in the role of sisters in this process and in three aspects of the narratives that I collected: sisters' stories of self or subjectivity, women's stories about their sister/s and about their sister relationship/s.

The second aim concerning the role of subjectivity in narratives of self is the one that I have pursued. I modified the first aim as my conceptual framework evolved in the course of

fieldwork and analysis and as my thinking about language/talk, liberation/resistance, entrenchment, power, structure and agency became more refined. I exchanged thinking in terms of structures for that of positions. My thinking evolved and embraced a concern with possibility for change *within* the family. I came to understand the radical implications of a de-centred active subject, fragmented, pluralistic, and continually changing: it opened up sites for 'rewriting' family scripts. Hence my definition of subjectivity includes both the role of experience and narrative produced through language or talk, for language or in some cases, silence, plays a key role in constructing and de-constructing what often appear to be very fixed roles and relationships between sisters in the family constellation. By experience I mean 'a complex of habits' and 'practices' (de Lauretis 1984:182-3), contact patterns or 'strings of interactions'[36] between sisters, conflict and emotions[37]. These practices and events can include making plans, writing letters, phoning, buying presents and providing meals. This form of emotional or 'relational work' (Doucet 1993; Ayres 1983) can contribute to the creation of a dyadic culture with its own rituals, pet names and private language[38].

In the following chapters (V, VI, VII, VIII), I show how talk/language and silence were paramount in sister ties, mirrored in the research process itself, in opening or closing up options for explicitly modifying subjectivities and relationships. Implicit in my definition of subjectivity are two important features: the ideas of change and of positionality. By change I mean that subjectivity is both active[39] and shifting, constructing and reconstructing itself through a process of 'reflective practice'. As Alcoff explains:

> The key component of Lauretis's formulation is the dynamic she poses at the heart of subjectivity: a fluid interaction in constant motion and open to alteration by self-analysing practice. (Alcoff 1988:425)

De Lauretis' (1986) notion of the agency of the subject is constituted within a historical process of consciousness that forms individual identity. This internal process coexists with an external one. Subjectivity is simultaneously exposed to external social influences where it becomes positioned by other discourses and individuals. De Lauretis explains:

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36 Duck and Perlman (1985:5).

37 Studies of romantic relationships have explored various dynamics of intimate relationships including autonomy and connection (La Gaipa 1990; Baxter 1987; Gouldner and Symons Strong 1987; Argyle and Henderson 1985); uncertainty (Duck 1988; Duck and Miell 1986), the 'unwritten contracts of friendship' (Wiseman 1986), dissolution (Duck 1982), conflict (Gouldner and Symons Strong 1987; Helgeson *et al.* 1987; Rose 1984; Wright 1982) and endings (Harvey *et al.* 1989).

38 See Baxter (1987); Duck (1991; 1990).

39 Mens-Verhulst (1993a; 1993b) uses a similar notion of active subjectivity in the context of women shaping their 'mothering' and 'daughtering' relationships.

> Self and identity, in other words, are always grasped and understood within a particular discursive configuration. Consciousness, therefore, is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions. (De Lauretis 1986:8)

Alcoff[40] (1988) uses the term *position* to refer to gender as a place from which to act politically and understands women's position as relative rather than fixed, changing in a historical and cultural context within a network of relations:

> Therefore, the concept of positionality includes two points: first, as already stated, that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context; but, second, that the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilised (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place were a meaning can be *discovered* (the meaning of femaleness). (Alcoff 1988:434)

Alcoff's notion of subjectivity as positionality includes both the idea of agency and of specific location in multiple discourses. It implies that women can position themselves and be positioned in different ways in a number of contexts and relationships and even within the same relationship. I illustrate the significance of this point in Chapter VII(see section 5) with examples from the data about the different 'positions' older and younger sisters adopt in their relationships with each other[41].

Another consequence of defining subjectivity in terms of change and positionality is that it allows for a more complex analysis of the interaction between women as subjects and broader social structures than did my earlier use of the notion of 'resistance'. Resistance initially seemed a useful concept for theorising both subjectivity and the structural effects of sister relationships. Feminist researchers have examined resistance[42] to the social construction of femininity and feminine sexuality in the context of friendship, psychological well-being and sexual empowerment among pre-teens and teenagers[43], young adults and the middle-aged (Holland *et al.* 1998; Jerrome 1984).

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40 I am grateful to Valerie Hey for introducing me to Alcoff's ideas.

41 Walkerdine (1986; 1985) examines the different subject positions available to girls and women in relation to discourses of regulation in schooling and the family. And Finch and Mason (1993) use the term 'structural position' in relation to family relationships which includes material and moral commitments.

42 For an account of sub-cultures as forms of resistance to class and femininity, see McRobbie and Nava (1984); McRobbie (1977).

43 See Hey (1997; 1994); Mann (1996); Rossiter (1994); Lees (1993; 1986); Brown and Gilligan 1993; 1992); Gilligan *et al.* (1990); Frazer (1988a; 1988b).

Indeed, pressure to be a 'good girl' or a 'nice girl'[44] can contribute to three forms of resistance among teenage girls[45]: 'healthy resistance' in their pre-teens when girls can speak their minds (Rogers 1993:265); 'political resistance' when girls 'disagree openly' (Brown and Gilligan 1993:17); and 'psychological resistance' when they are pressured to silence their feelings. Gilligan's work illuminates some of the psychological processes teenage girls experience, especially the link between talk and emotional well-being or connectedness (Gilligan *et al.* 1990). Her theory of resistance is useful for mapping changes in girls' subjectivity at a time of transition in their lives when 'resistance' might not be such a transparent process (Gilligan *et al.* 1990)[46]. The term resistance, however, does suggest a fairly monolithic engagement between subject and society.

In contrast with the relational psychologists' work, post-structuralist analyses of the contradictory aspects of heterosexual feminine subjectivities offer interpretations more embedded in the hegemonic cultural and social practices that form the backdrop of girls' and women's lives. Changing and positioned subjectivity rather than 'resistance' reflects many of the contradictory aspects of women's experiences as subjects in relationships which can be experienced as *both* liberating and entrenching and as fluctuating between connectedness and separateness (Edwards 1993b).

Conclusion

I have outlined the study's conceptual framework based on a 'tool-box' approach which combines elements from feminist standpoint theory, feminist post-structuralism and auto/biographical work in sociology. All offer possibilities for tracing the way that sisters develop accounts of their relationships and their lives. The main influence of standpoint theory has been at the level of methodology. Both standpoint theory and post-structuralist thought have contributed to my ontological and epistemological positions which draw on both material and discursive approaches (see Table 4). In the remaining chapters I show how, the social in my study, is constituted both by the material and the ideal, institutions, power relations *and* discourse and language; and how knowledge is produced from experience *and* narrative.

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44 See Hey (1997); Lees (1993); Holland *et al.* (1992; 1991b); Walkerdine (1990); Steedman (1986).

45 See Brown and Gilligan (1993; 1992); Rogers (1993); Gilligan *et al.* (1990; 1988).

46 For an empirical illustration of this idea see Anyon (1983).

Table 4: Conceptual Framework Adopted in the Current Study

Level of Theory	Theory Adopted	Concepts
Ontology	Feminist Standpoint Theory Feminist Post-structuralist Theory	Experience, the material, the emotional and ideology Narrative and discourse produced through language
Epistemology	Feminist Standpoint Theory Feminist Post-structuralist Theory	Power relations Agentic and knowing subjectivity
Methodology	Feminist Standpoint Theory	'Middle ground position' between participants' and researcher's subjectivity
Method of data collection and analysis	Auto/biographical Work in Sociology	Language as link between experience and narrative

The auto/biographical approach to collecting and interpreting personal life histories has been influential at the level of method. I applied it in the field and during the stage of data analysis in order to explore internal changes within sister relationships as well as the interaction between these relationships and changing subjectivities. This method has enabled me to collect and analyse stories of agentic subjectivity: in this chapter, I described this process at the theoretical level. In Chapters III and IV, I consider the methodological implications of this method for fieldwork and analysis, respectively.

Feminist post-structuralism provided me with a theoretical notion of subjectivity. I have highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of notions of resistance and presented instead a definition of subjectivity embedded in change and positionality. Postmodern and auto/biographical accounts of subjectivity suggest that the tensions within sister relationships can illuminate our understanding of the interaction between subject and society. Feminist post-structuralism also modified my understanding of power relations in the private realm. My thinking has evolved: I have moved away from a dichotomy between structure and agency, the public and the private as two separate realms, to an understanding of power located in multiple sites (Stanley and Wise 1993). My gaze has turned to discourses and power relations rather than structures, and agentic subjectivity and positionings rather than agency alone.

In the next chapter, I apply empirical findings from studies of kinship and female friendship and theoretical ideas from studies about female lives to sister relationships. In Chapter IV, I apply the concepts of power relations and negotiation, gendered talk and subjectivity to the data in the form of a typology which is based on the ideas discussed in this chapter and in Chapter I.

Chapter III

Research Design

Chapter III

Research Design

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design adopted in this exploratory study of sister relationships. It sets out the aims and research questions and presents the methods used. It also recounts the sampling and access process and describes the sample before considering several methodological issues to do with researching aspects of private life. One issue concerned the distinction between the private realm of sister ties, its visibility during the research process in the semi-public space of the interview and its public representation in the writing up. Distinguishing between three different realms - the personal, the private and the semi-public - drew my attention to the need for an appropriate and specific language with which to capture and represent sister ties. This language stemmed from many of the ideas outlined in the previous two chapters. This chapter also examines the implications for both participants and researcher of working with this language in and out of the field.

1. Aims and research questions

This study of sister relationships during girlhood and womanhood considers their evolution and changes over time. The focus is on active rather than inactive sister ties: active refers to sisters who have some form of contact even if infrequent and therefore women with no relationship with their sisters are absent from the study. This research, as previously mentioned, has four aims. One aim is to document an unexplored kin tie and an invisible aspect of girls' and women's lives - their experiences and the process of sistering. A second is to contribute to the sociology of kin and friendship networks through conceptualising the social and individual effects of these kin relationships - as a form of social support and as accommodation, survival or resistance to existing patterns of familial and sexual relationships. A third aim is to explore empirically the construction of subjectivity in sister relationships through concepts derived from post-structuralist theories - for example, emotions, talk and negotiation in the context of power relations between sisters. Finally, the study also aims to contribute to the methodological literature on researching family and personal relationships, a sensitive area of private life which raises a number of ethical dilemmas.

Five research questions guide this study, which charts the way that sister relationships are socially constructed. The first asks: what are the different types of ties that exist among

sisters: to what extent are these based on sociability, intimacy, care or rivalry; are these ties more familial or friend-like? Secondly, the study asks: how do sisters maintain their relationships, what contact patterns exist between them? Thirdly, what are the various factors that affect the different ties that exist between sisters? While a number of factors are relevant such as the age gap, birth order, the number of sisters or siblings in the household, the stage of life, class, geographical proximity, and ethnicity, age has been the main variable examined in the current study. Two other research questions have structured the study: how do sister relationships change as women grow older? And finally, what are the differences and similarities between sister relationships and friendships with other women? These broad questions which inform the study can only elicit themes and connections between the various processes explored rather than specific answers.

2. Method of data collection

These research questions are addressed through the qualitative methodology adopted in this exploratory study. The objective is to understand participants' accounts of their relationships through a close-grained investigation rather than to make generalisations (Jayaratne and Stewart 1991). Qualitative research typically uses small samples and intensive methods of data collection and analysis which can be particularly appropriate for studying the social processes and meanings of a specific family bond.

The instruments

I used several techniques in order to document the different types of tie and contact patterns that exist between sisters, the factors that affect their relationships, the differences and similarities with other female friendships, and changes in these ties over time. I accessed the sample principally through snowballing and I used four methods to collect the data: a short structured questionnaire completed by the researcher to gather demographic information, two self-complete instruments based on methods used in social work (DOH 1988), and a semi-structured depth interview. The self-complete instruments included an Ecomap or spatial visual technique for mapping kin and friendship networks and a Flowchart of life events: both were useful for enabling participants to reflect on a taken for granted relationship.

The Ecomap involves drawing connecting lines between the respondent placed in a circle in the centre of the page and other key members in their social network: different types of lines are drawn to indicate the various types of ties that exist between family, friends and colleagues, for example strong, weak or stressful (see Appendix II). The Flowchart records turning-points in the sister relationship and reviews life events in the general sense of the term (Riessman 1989). This instrument requires participants to recall and reflect on changes

in their relationship over time to do with the birth of a sister, changing school, girlfriends and boyfriends, leaving home and changing patterns of closeness/distance and dependence/independence (see Appendix III). I also conducted semi-structured depth interviews, tape recorded and later transcribed, lasting approximately one and a half hours, and accompanied by fieldnotes and an on-going research diary.

Piloting the instruments

At the start of my study I wanted to explore how sisters talk about the body and sexual health, as a result of my earlier research on family communication patterns (Hey *et al.* 1993). I piloted a range of methods before deciding on which ones to use. These included focus groups, a questionnaire, the two self-complete instruments and a semi-structured interview. I carried out two focus groups: one with a group of mature women students and another with three teenage sisters from the same family.

The focus group with the women ranging in age from their twenties to their sixties generated useful information about topics relevant to exploring and understanding sister relationships. These included exclusivity, notions of 'duty' and 'caring' raised by older sisters, reciprocity, the 'unconditional' aspect of this relationship for some sisters, social construction versus biology ('is blood thicker than water?'), selective memory and the difficulty of remembering past events, the taboo of sexuality, the importance of the age difference and common features with other relationships such as pleasure and pain. I subsequently used many of these ideas to structure the interview guide (see Appendix IV).

The second focus group was valuable for observing the dynamics between sisters, especially the way that participants encouraged each other to recollect and describe jointly aspects of their relationships (Kitzinger 1994). The focus group method was more appropriate with younger teenage sisters where there was a certain amount of understanding and cooperation between them than with older sisters in their thirties and forties. When I proposed the option of an interview with one or more of her sisters, one participant in her late thirties warned me of the danger of a group interview verging on 'family therapy' and suggested separate interviews. This comment reflects the way that interviews constitute managed episodes of social interaction designed to produce specific accounts, as are the access negotiations with participants beforehand (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994).

I piloted the questionnaire, two self-complete instruments and interview guide in 1994 with teenagers, sisters in their twenties and a woman in her forties. I also conducted an individual interview with a 6 year-old girl using the 'draw and write' technique which was

successful in terms of encouraging her to talk about her three older sisters (Williams *et al.* 1989). She drew the qualities she liked about her sisters and the different activities that she does with each of them and with her parents (see Figure I, p. 68).

While the pair interviews, like the focus group with the three teenage sisters, were useful for observing the interactions between sisters and encouraging joint recollection or 'memory work' (Kippax 1990 *et al.*; Haug 1987), the individual interview enabled the participant to reflect in more depth on her relationship/s with her sister/s. I explore the methodological and ethical dilemmas to do with privacy and confidentiality concerning pair and individual interviews later in the chapter.

The piloting phase drew my attention to the difficulties of access. I also refined the instruments to make them more user-friendly. In place of the questionnaire which many women found off-putting, I devised a one-page availability sheet for participants to complete (see Appendix VII) and a short structured demographic interview which I completed in order to collect background information (see Appendix V).

I piloted the two self-complete instruments. The Ecomap was especially suitable for teenage sisters as an introduction to some of the themes raised in the interview to do with social networks and different types of ties with family and friends: weak, strong, stressful. One of its limitations as Adrienne (age 12) pointed out was its inaccuracy as these ties are changing all the time and can be both strong and stressful at the same time. Twenty-three out of 37 women completed the Ecomap. The aim of the Flowchart was to trace and compare significant events in sisters' individual lives and in their relationship with each other or their 'joint' lives. During the piloting I changed the format and again made it more user friendly: I gave examples of turning-points I wanted the participants to consider such as marriage, bereavement, contact and separations (see Appendix III). I also used the Flowchart in a flexible way: twenty women filled it in at the start or the end of the interview while seventeen out of 37 women declined to complete it.

3. Sample description, access and ethics in the field

Theoretical sampling was used to generate a small number of participants for this exploratory study, primarily a mapping exercise of the dominant themes in sister ties.

Sampling

A purposive sample was generated based on the variable of age in order to fill the gap identified in previous studies, which focused on infancy and the elderly, in order to examine in detail the teenage years and womanhood. I decided to sample across several

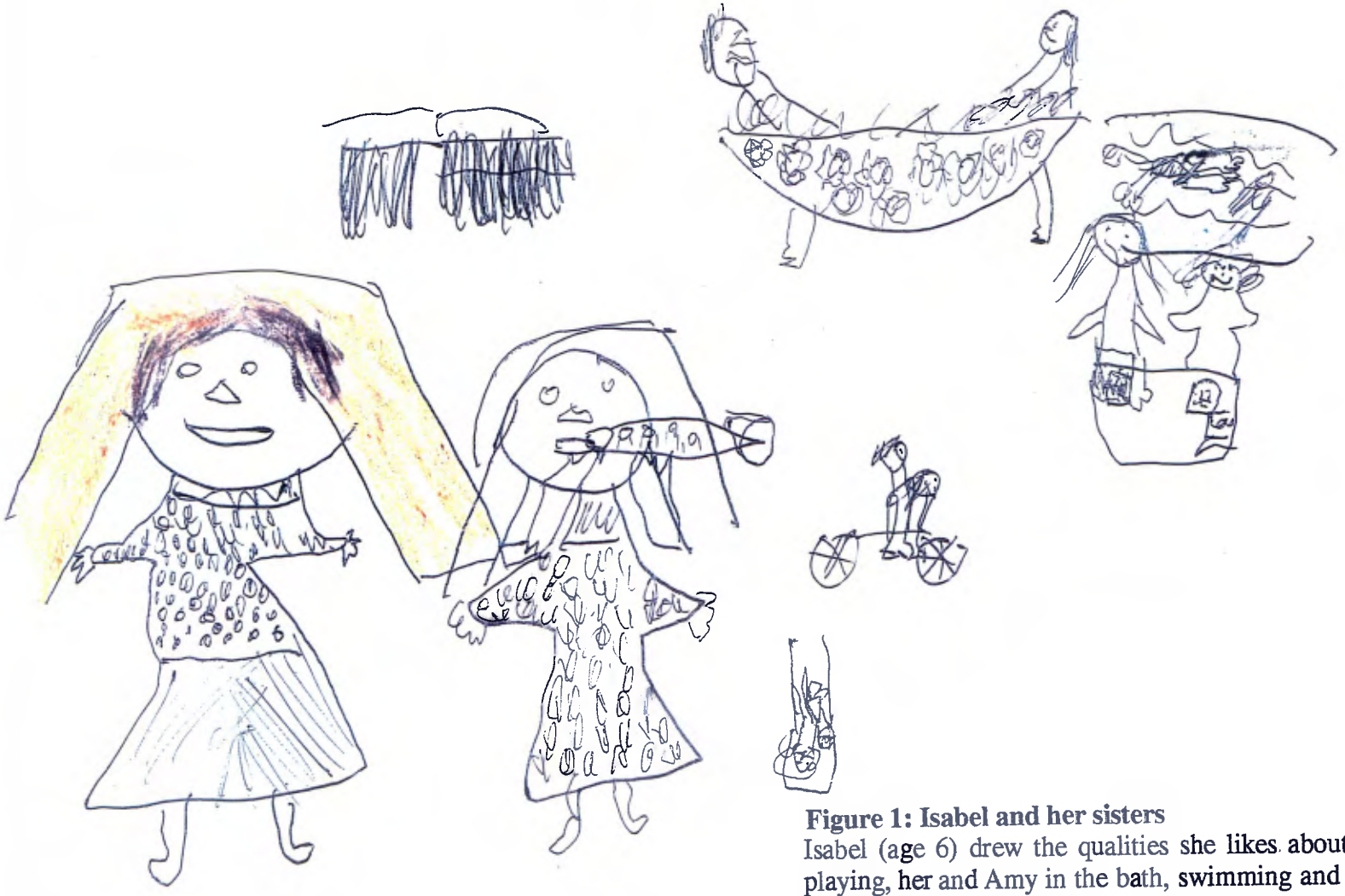

Figure 1: Isabel and her sisters
Isabel (age 6) drew the qualities she likes about her sisters: Celia's hair and flute-playing, her and Amy in the bath, swimming and book-binding at an after-school club with Eve, her mother reading her a story and her father taking her to school on his bike.

decades from the teen years to the forties in order to trace changes and continuities in sisters' relationships. The sample is made up of sisters who have an active and biological relationship with each other in order to understand how they construct the content and form of their contact and its significance. The sample however did not intentionally exclude non-biological sisters: indeed one pair who took part in the study talked about their half-siblings and the three fathers who they had known. The sample consists of 37 women spanning six decades from the pre-teen years to the fifties aged between 6 and 50 from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. All the women apart from three (aged 6, 9 and 50) were in their teens, twenties, thirties and forties.

I carried out 29 interviews including one interview with a girl in her pre-teens aged 6; four interviews with teenage sisters; seven with sisters in their twenties; eleven with sisters in their thirties; and six with sisters in their forties and fifties (see Table 5). Some women were interviewed *individually* and their sister/s did not take part in the study for a number of reasons. She either lived abroad, refused to take part or in some cases where two out of three or four sisters in one family were interviewed, she was not invited to take part by the sisters themselves or the researcher. These reasons are discussed further below. Some women were interviewed together in *paired interviews* with their sister when they got on and were willing. In other cases each member from a set of sisters was interviewed *separately*. These data from the interviews provide insights on sisters' experiences of their relationships as well as observations of the dynamics of the relationship at work. The methodological dilemmas of analysing these different types of interview narratives are examined in the next chapter (see section 5).

Table 5: Sample by Age and Type of Interview

Age	Individual Interviews	Paired Interviews	Separate Interviews	N Interviews	N Women
Pre-teens	0	0	1	1	1
Teens	0	4[1]	0	4	9
Twenties	1	3	4	8	11
Thirties	2	0	10	12	12
Forties	2	0	1	3	3
Fifties	1	0	0	1	1
Total	6	7	16	29	37

1 This figure includes three paired interviews and one small group discussion with three teenage sisters.

The interviews were carried out in three urban locations: London, the Midlands and four towns within the London commuter belt. Twenty-six women are white; five, Asian; three, African-Caribbean and three are from mixed ethnic backgrounds. Twenty-seven women are middle class and ten, working class. I have taken several factors - education, housing and occupation - into account and assigned the participants to a class accordingly. I gave more importance to education and housing to younger sisters in their teens and twenties, and more importance to education and occupation to older employed women. Twenty women are single and seventeen have a partner. All the women are heterosexual apart from one who is lesbian. Sixteen are mothers and 21 are childfree (see Table 6). The women come from a range of occupational backgrounds (see Table 7, Appendix I). The 37 women come from a total number of 19 family sets including nine all girl families and ten families of mixed siblings.

Table 6: Summary of the Sample

Class	**Ethnicity**	**Marital Status**	**Sexual Identity**	**Mothering Status**
27 middle class	26 white	20 single	36 heterosexual	21 childfree
10 working class	11 black[2]	17 partnered	1 lesbian	16 mothers

Access

Recruiting a sample of sisters presented dilemmas which other researchers studying family relationships and friendship networks and working in a cultural anthropology tradition also experienced[3]. Encouraged by their example and wary of the advantages, pitfalls and limitations, I used what I initially considered to be a range of unorthodox sampling methods.

Access was through four routes. First, I contacted sisters through snowballing from my personal and professional networks. The snowballing method has been used by other researchers studying family and friendship networks (Duncan and Edwards 1998; Cotterill 1992; Vaughan 1987). I ruled out people I knew at first hand and contacted sisters at one step removed from me through work, relatives and friends. Several women were recruited this way (18). Secondly, I interviewed two women who I had previously interviewed for

2 This figure includes five Asian women, three African-Caribbean women and three women of mixed heritage.

3 See Van Every (1995); Doucet (1993); Hey *et al.* (1993); Weston (1991); Oliker (1989); Burgoyne and Clark (1984).

the family health research project on which I was employed in 1994. Thirdly, I contacted four women in a waiting room in a GP practice in a London borough, using in this case the same access source as for the above *Natural History of the Family* project[4]. Lastly, snowballing from participants themselves to access their sisters and in two cases their friends led me to 13 more women (total 37 women). Like Sharpe (1994a) and Cotterill (1994), I opted for flexibility: I started out interviewing women individually and in pairs, then interviewed related sisters, separately.

These sampling and access methods produced a small sample of active sister ties suited to an exploratory study. However, the constraints of access have excluded certain categories of sister relationships from the research. Sisters who have a difficult relationship which makes contact extremely rare, who do not maintain any contact or for whom the relationship is less significant than other relationships in their lives, are likely to be absent. Many women (32) were approached as potential participants who for a number of reasons did not take part in the study. The reasons for refusal include not having a sister, having a sister who lived abroad, lack of time or lack of interest. One pair of sisters in their nineties who lived together were prepared to take part in the study until they had to cancel when one of them fell ill and the other began to care for her: they described themselves as 'devoted to each other'. Other women were enthusiastic but could not commit themselves to an interview.

Ethics in the field

When I first contacted potential participants I sent them an information sheet describing the study and an availability sheet which they completed and returned to me (see Appendices VI and VII). The women were then sent a confirmation letter about the interview date (see Appendix VIII). I reiterated the aims of the research in my introductory comments at the start of the interview (see Appendix IX). The process of contacting participants and negotiating access was a lengthy one which required careful negotiation between sisters themselves, myself and my first contact. I contacted participants' sisters in order to arrange an interview only if both parties consented to taking part in the study. The make-up of the sample with varying combinations of pair, individual and separate interviews reflects the different consent patterns according to age: older sisters were less willing to talk to me in a pair interview than teenagers or sisters in their twenties.

Privacy during the interview was sometimes difficult to secure. I interviewed several women with their toddlers and in one case a husband present. Other family researchers have noted the difficulty of securing a separate space for interviews (Brannen *et al.* 1994).

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4 See Holland *et al.* (1996).

The majority of the interviews were carried out in participants' homes. Privacy was also negotiated between sisters themselves regarding pair or separate interviews in cases where I interviewed more than one sister from the same family.

The issue of confidentiality posed other challenges. In situations where I interviewed two sisters separately, each sister was guaranteed confidentiality about the information disclosed during the research process and anonymity during the writing up of the research. I did not disclose or use any information received from one woman when I interviewed her sister/s. Some women were concerned that some of the information they disclosed to me might get back to other family members involved in the access process (fathers or husbands). I stressed to all the women that I used the same interview guide and covered the same ground and themes with everyone: I reassured them that I would not use what one woman said to inform the questions I asked her sister. While most sisters said mainly at the start or end of the interview that 'nothing they said would they mind the others knowing', in the interview itself this was contradicted by some of the actual information revealed to the researcher usually concerning sexual relationships.

I asked participants why they wanted to take part in the research, whether they wanted any results about the findings when the study was over and how they felt about taking part. Some of the reasons they gave for wanting to take part included helping me out, doing their sister a favour if she had already been interviewed, fascination with the topic, a desire to find out what their sister thinks (this in the case of pair interviews), their belief in the importance of the sister relationship and memories of 'closeness' between a mother and her sister.

In the rest of this chapter, I consider the methodological implications of adopting the auto/biographical method derived from work in sociology for collecting personal narratives (Personal Narratives Group 1989) during fieldwork[5]. I turn first to the challenge posed by the very act of researching a socially invisible aspect of private life, especially the 'private forms of subjectivity and public versions' (Hey 1997:33) as they were enacted in the social and 'manufactured' context of the interview.

4. The interview as a social process: accessing sisters in private

One of the implications of researching a publicly invisible relationship which exists primarily in the private realm, is that the research process is located mid-way between each world. This process is about making '...explicit what we know already implicitly as participants in a culture' (Johnson 1986:301). The tension between entering the private

5 These methodological dilemmas are also discussed in Mauthner (1998).

world of *lived cultures* made up of moments '...embedded in every day social intercourse in very specific sites and occasions' and representing the more hidden aspects of relationships in a semi-public way appears in the interview situation (Johnson 1986:287). By semi-public I mean the space between the existence of sister ties as 'private' forms and their absence in the public institutionalized sphere - a space where the relationship becomes visible to participants and researcher as sisters.

The act of describing and representing these relationships relies on revealing aspects of experience in a very personal and emotional way. I use 'personal' to refer to the individual 'I' as distinct from 'private' although these four definitions - public, semi-public, private and personal - permeate each other and cannot be neatly separated (Edwards and Ribbens 1998; Griffiths and Seller 1996). Exposing private and personal experience in this way, through events and emotions, is a sensitive process where participants and researcher can feel cautious and vulnerable. Perhaps this approach is necessary, as Adrienne Rich suggests, in order to create a new collective and public knowledge:

> I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours. (Rich 1984:16)

However this process of describing private *lived cultures* and creating new knowledge is not without its costs. One difficulty was the feelings of ambivalence experienced by the women I spoke to about the impact of taking part in the research. Many felt disloyal in talking about a personal relationship to a stranger, although others felt positive about acknowledging an important relationship and talking to me as researcher and 'sister'. Another was the challenge of remembering past events: one woman in her twenties said that the interview made her want to find out more about their early teens from her sister, who did not participate in the study.

Attempts to represent elements of a private relationship are reflected in some of the tensions between talk and silence, verbal and physical behaviour, distance and intimacy in an interview with two young sisters. Hilda[6], age 9, and Adrienne, age 12, sitting on a couch while they spoke to me, moved closer together and further apart throughout the interview as they laughed, giggled and quibbled about different aspects of their relationship[7]. Their

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6 In this chapter, as in all the chapters, pseudonyms have been used to refer to the participants. Geographical, occupational and some demographic details have been omitted or modified in order to protect the women's anonymity.

7 Hilda and Adrienne's relationship was explored in an ea rly paper I gave (see Mauthner 1995). Additional details about the participants are provided in Appendix XI.

physical intimacy was apparent in these 'couch dynamics'. But for most of the interview, they talked about each other in the third person as 'she' rather than 'you', which distanced them from each other. Another way that Adrienne distanced herself from Hilda and, implicitly the intimacy of their relationship, was her repeated use of the term 'annoying'.

> Adrienne: We, I mean. I find her totally annoying most of the time, and that, I mean, you know, but we're not, you know, we get on sometimes but...you know, I just find little, I mean...
> Hilda: Yeah. [under Adrienne's voice]
> Adrienne: I'm like that with everybody really.
> Hilda: I think so really, yeah an' it's... [under Adrienne's voice, talks more slowly than Adrienne]
> Adrienne: [talks more haltingly than Hilda] I mean, I get annoyed the way she speaks, you know and everything....
> Hilda: [laughs][8]

What is striking about this semi-public account of the relationship is the assertion of having little in common. These reasons were offered by Adrienne and agreed by Hilda:

> Adrienne: We both go to very different schools, we did go to very different schools anyway and so...we don't have much in common to talk about really.
> Hilda: No, we couldn't...

And they are not the same age:

> Adrienne: And as there's an age gap, you know, we don't, we don't have much to talk about really, I mean.

This oscillation between distance and intimacy, through their words and their body movements on the couch, the emphasis on their differences as well as the issues on which they see eye to eye, pervades their dialogue. Their discussion of the ethics of friendship, for example, reveals a shared understanding of their social world, when Adrienne first condemns Hilda's practice of 'dumping' best friends before acknowledging that she, too, is familiar with this practice:

> Adrienne: Hilda goes through her friends like, just amazing, how many best friends she has!
> Hilda: I've got one best friend.
> Adrienne: You had, she just goes through them, you know.

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8 The transcribing conventions adopted throughout the thesis is as follows: [...] indicates excised text; ^^ signals an inaudible word; ... corresponds to a pause; and [laughs] means that descriptive comments have been added by the researcher.

Hilda: I've got one best friend and lots of special friends.
Adrienne: Yeah, but you, first it was Juliette, then it was Rhonda, then it was Gwen.
Hilda: It wasn't Rhonda.
Adrienne: It was Rhonda.
Hilda: It was not Rhonda, I never...
Adrienne: It was Rhonda.
Hilda: It was not Rhonda.
Adrienne: It was Rhonda.
MM: But why, why's that not OK?
Adrienne: Because, because she just dumps them, like they're little...
Hilda: I do not. I've only...
Adrienne: ...little pieces of rubbish or something...
Hilda: No, it's, I do not. The only person I've ever kind of said, I've kind of gone off, 'cos I do not like her, was Juliette, that's the only person. [...] I didn't kind of, I didn't become her best friend because um she was really nice and stuff, and...
Adrienne: Because there was no one else to be your best friend [laughs].
Hilda: Yeah, I mean, I just got attached to her and then she just became it and I tried to work off her. And then she's got lots of other friends now.
Adrienne: Yeah. No, I mean, I don't think it's bad, I mean I've done it tons of times but [laughs]...

Hilda and Adrienne's detailed analysis of the 'dumping' and 'working her off' phenomenon highlights their implicit shared understanding of the intricacies of best friendship and the appreciation they have of each other, their actions and motives. Indeed talk in friendship generates and maintains a social world through 'shared knowledge structures' (Coates 1996; Duck 1990; Morgan 1990).

The sisters do not express their understanding and appreciation of each other explicitly; this could be due to their age. Instead, it is visible through their body language as they both sit on the sofa in the privacy of their home: this forms the private experience of their relationship, only accessible in the social interview situation. Here is another example of Hilda and Adrienne affirming their sibship:

Hilda: Well, I'd rather have Adrienne than any other sister [whisper].
Adrienne: So would I.
Hilda: Just because, I mean, like...
Adrienne: I mean, I'd rather have Hilda [laughs]...
Hilda: [laughs] I'd rather have me than anybody else, I mean I...
Adrienne: I'd rather have Hilda.

In this semi-public account of their relationship the pair's affection is implicit and embedded in the way they finish each other's sentences, return to a topic following a digression, sit

next to each other, and possess intimate knowledge of each other's lives. This knowledge is exemplified by their grasp of the ups and downs of each of their various friendships: their affection creates a space where they can complain, listen and comment about friends or 'stupid cows', discuss arguments with friends together and ask each other for advice:

> MM: If you have an argument with a friend, do you tell each other?
> Hilda: We don't do it kind of personally. But we do it, kind of. We're always listening to each other. When we're telling Mum about something, we're always commenting and talking.
> Adrienne: Yeah.
> Hilda: ...we're always commenting and...
> Adrienne: Yeah.
> Hilda: ...and talking.
> Adrienne: You know, we'll say, 'Oh, I had a really awful day today, I had a really horrible, you know stupid cow sitting next to me', you know or, when we will say. I mean we, we'll...
> Hilda: And we'll kind of ask 'now who's she?'...
> Adrienne: Yeah.
> Hilda: ...like that.
> Adrienne: I mean we'll just, we won't really sort of...
> Hilda: ...kind of sit down at a table...
> Adrienne: Normally we...
> Hilda: ...and kind of say 'Guess what's happened at school?' and then we go and talk about it...
> Adrienne: I mean...
> Hilda: ...but I mean then just kind of overhear a conversation and she's telling everything...

Hilda and Adrienne's sense of their relationship as not having a lot in common contrasts with their intimacy and understanding of each other: one interpretation of this is to view their semi-public account during the interview of their private experience as a narrative of tensions and contradictions, differences and pleasures of intimate relationships, in this case between sisters. This narrative embraces both emotions and power relations found in other female relationships (Hey 1997; Cotterill 1994) and reflects the absence of a specific language to make this particular relationship visible.

5. The 'dream of a common language'[9]

One of the aims of my study is to create a new language for representing the tie between sisters, a language as yet undeveloped. One woman I interviewed describes her difficulty with putting her feelings into words about her changing relationship with her younger sister:

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9 See Rich (1978).

> Um, what was I going to say. It's hard to sort of explain it all logically or say eloquently but....it's fine now, I mean it's good. I mean it was fine, it was good before, it was just this one, you know, these couple of issues kept on coming up. (Rae, 30, about Bukhi, 25)

This new language draws on three different sources: first, through analogy with discourses of other female relationships - between friends, and mothers and daughters; second, life events and turning-points in sister relationships which foster both intimacy and distance; and third, theoretical concepts to do with power relations and subjectivity.

Representing sister relationships through analogy with other female relationships occurred frequently among the women I spoke to. Several compared their relationship with their sister to that with a best friend or mother figure.

> Zoe: ...it's like um you have best friends, yeah, but...you know that you've got that secret from your best friend as well that you can only tell your sister...so it's like, it's like a second best friend where you, so, I don't know, she is
> MM: So
> Zoe: She is like one of my best friends
> (Zoe, 17 speaking about Sofia, 16)

> I like her in a way that um, if I'm with her, I can eh, try....I try to be sisterly but I end up to be motherly in that sense. And um, when she's in a good mood we could have a giggle. (Carmen, 46 about Rita, 32)

Both the women and I appropriated cultural discourses and notions about mothers and friends as well as personal experiences of these ties in order to explore and describe sister relationships. These cultural discourses, in addition to empirical studies and theoretical writings, hint at areas of similarity and difference and enabled us to make the invisible accessible. Mother-daughter relationships, female friendship and 'best friendship' which touches on sisters as 'best friends', suggest several relevant themes for understanding sister relationships: confiding, changes in power, interdependence, separation and change over time[10]. Adrienne Rich's poem *Sibling Mysteries* contains images of mothers, best friends, even lovers:

> The daughters never were
> true brides of the father

10 See Hey (1997); Henwood (1995); Nice (1992); Apter (1990); Oliker (1989); O'Connor (1987); Fischer (1986); Chernin (1984); Rich (1984); Cohler and Grunebaum (1981).

the daughters were to begin with
brides of the mother

then brides of each other
under a different law

Let me hold and tell you
(Rich 1978:52)

A second way of representing sister relationships during the research process is by focusing on life events and turning-points in the women's lives as sisters. This approach stems from work on the life-course, family histories and auto/biography[11]. A sociological approach to auto/biography allows the complex webs of relationships in which women's lives as sisters are enmeshed to be traced. These webs can be traced by focusing on change in the sister tie itself, the women's subjectivities, and transitions in other key bonds - with mothers, fathers and children, lovers and friends.

Significant turning-points in the sister tie include changing schools, moving, leaving home, getting married, 'coming out' and becoming a mother, in relationship/s with sister/s and other members of wider kin groups - fathers, brothers, cousins, aunts. The importance of these events lies in the emotional and physical intimacy and distance which they create. Anne (38), describes a change in her relationship with one of her younger sisters, *Hailey* (33), when they were teenagers, brought about by the family's move to Austria. Anne remained in England and lived with relatives while Hailey moved abroad with her parents.

> Anne: my sister *Hailey* and I had a terrible relationship when we were much much younger. I mean I think I was very sort of weak willed and she would bully me. Well no not physically bully me but she could just irritate me beyond belief and for a long time we had quite a distant relationship but in fact now I get on extremely well with her [...]
> MM: When did that change then?
> Anne: I think probably by her going off to Vienna was quite a major move. I remember being in the kitchen with my mother and I can't remember what age now. But they'd certainly been in Vienna three or four years and my mother was complaining about something that *Hailey* had done and I was actually defending her behaviour I really can't remember the details but [what] I do remember was my mother turning round and saying...you know, that's extraordinary to find you actually defending something that *Hailey*'s done! I mean that must be the first time in your life. And I suddenly realised that I think I, probably distance...um had a lot to do with it.

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11 See Stanley and Morgan (1993); Vaughan (1987); Burgoyne and Clark (1984); Weiss and Lowenthal (1975).

This auto/biographical method organised around life events and turning-points enabled women to call up memories from the past in an unstructured form as illustrated by Leonie's stream of consciousness account of growing up as the eldest in a family of seven siblings. Her narrative is punctuated by a series of episodes and transitions in her life: some are connected to her siblings' lives, for example her sister Roxanne's birth, and others to events in her own trajectory - leaving home, getting married and becoming a mother. Leonie, age 47, looks back at when she was 15, had just left school and started work. Her reminiscence begins in the recent past with an anecdote about one of her younger sister's birthdays, before delving back further to her teenage years:

> Leonie: I put down her fortieth birthday card this year and I could remember, and I wrote also the memories, I'm sure I didn't get them in exactly the right order but I can see my father arriving at my aunt's house to tell us of this birth of this sister and it was myself and Jeanne [other younger sister] and Morgan [her younger brother] that were there and she'd got eyes like one of us and hands like another, nose like another...but I said ..but what was best of all, he bought, I can remember, it was licorice, the licorice rolls with the comfort ^ in the middle, you know. So again I put this in the card saying, I'm not sure what was more important, you or...getting the telly and the sweets! And Madonna [her youngest sister], well Madonna's birth coincided with me starting work so...er...again this was...at the point I was going...about this... I have this idea that you are so often at the stage that your children are at: so if you've got two young children, then you're dealing with things at that level, aren't you? And things, where the mother, she'd got us...right across the span, she'd got this brand new baby and she'd got someone who was about to start work and to this day, I count myself lucky that I didn't start work with socks! Because...that was just the stage of things, you know that...I mean it was very much the first outfit that I had to start work at Woolworths, was very like a school uniform [laughs] and of course this just, I just went totally off the rails where clothes were concerned! I mean, my first salaries were spent on, you know, the highest heels [laughs] and the...tottering along, but you know, I think it was...er...my small thing of rebellion at er...hello, it's me, I'm here, although I was the first one, look, I'm working sort of thing. I mean, it was always sweets on a...I think payday was Thursday evenings, then it was always sort of, sweets for all of them, it was like, this 3 pounds 13 shillings and four pence that I earned sort of got spread around the family.

This powerful evocation of teenage working-class femininity contains elements of both Leonie's life and her siblings' lives. In this sense the auto/biographical approach was particularly appropriate in this study of relationships where 'self' and 'other' interconnect so profoundly.

A third way of representing sister relationships is to form a language for making this tie visible, to develop a theoretical language: theory can prove useful for setting lives and relationships in a wider context than that of the individual by relating the experience of the individual to social structures or historical time (Miller 1995; Steedman 1992). The theoretical language employed in my study stems from two sources: first, empirical sociological research on kinship and female friendship[12] and, second, my 'tool-box' approach (Ball 1994:14) drawing on two theories - feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism - and sociological work in auto/biography.

Feminist theories allow women's gendered subjectivity and the sister relationship to be placed at the centre of women's lives (Maynard 1995). Feminist research highlights a number of methodological concerns to do with researching a family relationship, as well as the issue of power relations between participant and researcher[13]. It also highlights the importance of making the subjectivity of both participants and researcher visible in the research process, something which more traditional objective and masculine methodologies ignore (Maynard 1994).

Feminist post-structuralism influenced my attempt to collect 'stories' about contradictory forms of gendered subjectivity in researching private experience (Walkerdine 1990; Steedman 1986). In addition, I have drawn on recent sociological work on auto/biography and the life and oral history traditions in order to develop: a method of data collection and analysis, a quasi ethnographic style in the field and a reflexive approach to locating myself in the research (Troyna 1994; Stanley 1993; Geiger 1986).

These three attempts to create a new language for representing sister relationships - through analogy with other female relationships; a focus on life events and turning-points; and developing theoretical concepts such as power relations and subjectivity - provided a framework for outlining the research questions, design and method of analysis. How useful was this language for talking to and about sisters in the field?

6. Sister talk in the field: feminist methodology in action

Fieldwork raised issues which I had not foreseen about the intersections between the personal, private and semi-public in interviews. I adopted a feminist standpoint methodology during fieldwork and collected data according to five relevant principles. I

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12 See Hey (1997); Sandmaier (1995); Fishel (1994); Mathias (1992); Oliker (1989); O'Connor (1987); Allan (1977a).

13 See Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994); Edwards (1993a); Opie (1992); Holland (1991); Brannen (1988).

paid attention to reflexivity, power relationships, participants' voices, the researcher's voice, and emotions in the research process. Applying these principles, however, raised several dilemmas for me as researcher which the language I developed for representing sister relationships did not address. This language - of analogy, life events and turning-points, and theoretical concepts - while useful for designing the study, selecting appropriate methods with which to gather the data, and encouraging the women to 'tell their stories', presented several difficulties for myself and the women I spoke to in terms of the five feminist principles. I present a retrospective and reflexive account of my struggle with these principles in the field, especially my attempt to maintain a balance between participants' voices and my own voice or location in the research process, and between accounts of personal and private experience in the semi-public space of the interview.

I began fieldwork with a clear mission to gather accounts of private experience from participants and, in this endeavour, the language I developed for representing and elucidating women's accounts of their relationships with their sisters was successful. For example, I devised a series of topics rather than questions covering life events and relationship transitions (see Appendix IV). Some of these topics included: contact patterns, changes in your relationship/s, school years, the age gap, significant events in your life and in your relationship/s with your sister/s and friends.

These topics allowed us, researcher and interviewee, to meander our way through the pleasures and tensions of the sister bond in an open exploratory way rather than in a standard chronological or linear fashion. Using the topics as a guide created an atmosphere conducive to talking about the 'sister experience', 'sistering' and allowed other relevant issues to surface. In the early stages of fieldwork I was far more concerned with gathering these accounts and accessing women to talk to me and was satisfied with my technique. Gradually I felt the emotional exhaustion of listening to the women's stories and eventually, in the middle of fieldwork, I puzzled over how I, as researcher and sister, was going to locate myself and my personal experience in the research. I return to this later.

I adopted several measures central to a feminist methodology for carrying out research in an ethical and sensitive manner with the women I spoke to (Stanley and Wise 1990). I explained the research to potential participants, negotiated access and consent with women and some of their sisters, attempted to manage the interview as a social interaction rather than 'therapy', respected privacy during interviews about women's personal experiences and their confidentiality from one interview to the next with related sisters. Throughout I adopted a flexible approach: some women offered to contact their sisters on my behalf to request their participation, others preferred me to contact them directly. I listened to their

feedback at the end of the interview, wrote and thanked them for taking part (see Appendix X) and contracted to send them a summary of the findings at the end of the study.

Moreover, during the interview itself, I adhered to several tenets of the technique to listen to the women attentively and let the interaction follow the themes which they raised (Devault 1990; Brannen 1988).

> We talked about what cropped up, what was relevant for her: like being single for instance [...] (Fieldnotes)
>
> I was so taken by her powerful narrative, her style and her forceful personality that I let myself be carried by her. (Fieldnotes)

My style became quasi ethnographic as I collected forms of life histories. At the outset, I refined the questions after every couple of interviews. I discovered that some private experiences were far too personal to discuss in an interview: certain childhood experiences and aspects of sexual relationships were off-limits. Some women remained silent and teenagers found the whole area of the body and sexuality far too salient and personal. The longer I spent in the field the more I moved away from my original set of questions to the topics mentioned above. The interview had a loose structure and so the order in which the topics were covered varied. My interviewing style became looser and I learned to ask fewer questions.

> I feel I am just plunging in and trying to get respondents to 'tell me their story'. Is this OK or enough I wonder? Maybe it is, I think about what Valerie Hey calls the 'naturalistic approach' used in ethnography and maybe this is what I am doing in a way in these loosely structured semi life histories. Or life histories of some aspects, only, of their lives. (Fieldnotes)

These ethical concerns and practical techniques were designed to ensure respect and sensitivity for the voices or subjectivities of the women with whom I spoke. They also provided me with complex, detailed, rich and 'messy' accounts of private experience (Clandinin and Connelly 1994). The language that influenced the interview topics enabled the women and me to represent moments and events in their relationships. These ethics, techniques and new language of representation, however, ignored another feminist principle, reflexivity, with which I grappled and only felt comfortable towards the end of my fieldwork. Reflexivity is a central tenet of a feminist methodology whereby the researcher documents the production of knowledge and locates herself in this process for '...the subjectivity of the researcher herself is part of research production' (Harrison and Lyon 1993:105). Here, I examine dilemmas of reflexivity during the stage of fieldwork;

issues to do with the process of data analysis are considered in the next chapter (see section 3).

Placing myself in the research required me to consider the place of personal experience in the accounts of private *lived cultures* that we - the women and I - produced and represented in the semi-public space of the interview. This was a fraught, taxing and shifting process. I experimented with several attempts to locate myself as researcher. Initially, I detached myself from the research because of its personal nature for me in order to maintain the privacy of my own relationship with my sister. I, too, am a sister and I found it difficult to keep the two realms of personal life and research in the semi-public domain separate, as did Song (1998) in her research on siblings. I addressed this issue in the fieldnotes I wrote after each interview. Here is one example:

> I do want to establish more distance with the participants. [...] Their experience felt close to mine. Maybe that was why I want to distance myself from it. (Fieldnotes)

Sometimes I veered to another extreme of degrees of disclosure during interviews which made me feel vulnerable afterwards. I revealed information about myself, as prescribed in the tradition of feminist research, which made me feel uncomfortable (Fontana and Frey 1994; Oakley 1981):

> They asked me some questions too and I answered, I figured they had told me so much. They were curious about my own relationship with my sister so I told them in a nutshell. (Fieldnotes)

This principle of exchange or reciprocity (Ribbens 1989) between researcher and participants is important in feminist research: here I raise it in relation to fieldwork; in the next chapter I return to it in relation to the process of data analysis (see sections 3 and 6).

My ambivalence about wanting to preserve my own privacy while asking others to make semi-public parts of their private experience was a dilemma throughout the research[14]. Only gradually did I find a position where I felt comfortable enough to disclose some personal information, engage with participants about the content of the research including its 'political' or feminist nature (Thorne 1980) and address the draining emotional effect of the research on me as researcher:

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14 Bell (1998) examines this issue in relation to keeping diaries.

> I think it's the most exploratory interview so far. Also one where there is more of myself in terms of the kinds of questions I asked though I did not actually say anything specific or explicit about myself. Perhaps this is me letting go a bit more. Also she did not ask me anything about me or the research... (Fieldnotes)
>
> So I said that it was also hard for me to listen and I have learned to become better at this myself only recently, i.e. how to go away from it all and not carry it all inside me. I did not talk at all about myself this time except in this way to say what the research process was like for me. I felt I struck the right note at last after the 22nd interview! I said to her that I have a sister and it has been hard to keep me separate from the 'work'. So I was talking about me, me as researcher, rather than me as private person which I was doing before although I hadn't wanted to. This felt right, comfortable, some reflexivity and sensitivity but no disclosure of the personal on my part. (Fieldnotes)

I alternated between distancing and disclosure regarding the women I interviewed before I found a middle-ground position that took account of my own subjectivity. My position shifted and the research process reflects my ambivalence[15]. Asked about myself and the research I usually answered. Next time I would follow suit with other feminist researchers who adopt controlled self-disclosure and reveal little information about the self unless the participants ask and then keep it to a minimum (Sharpe 1994b; Edwards 1993b). This is the position I felt most comfortable with as it allowed me to talk about myself as researcher with the women and maintain my own privacy as sister.

7. Constructing narratives of sister relationships

Some of the contradictions of applying feminist principles in the field for both the women I spoke to and myself as researcher stem from collecting narratives of private experience in the semi-public space of the interview. Managing the interview as a social event when researching an invisible relationship was difficult for two reasons. The act of making public private facets of life raised problems for both participants and myself to do with exposing personal, contradictory and taboo aspects of an idealized and significant bond - emotions and power relations (see Mauthner 1997). Risks are involved for all when representing hidden experience in order to produce collective and new knowledge, reflected in the oscillation between distancing and disclosure during interviews.

Another reason is the challenge of separating out one relationship from many other more prominent ones in the public eye and attempting to focus on it alone. The interviewees and I veered between enthusiasm and delight at this initiative, and caution and vulnerability about

15 See Miller (1998) for another example of a fluctuating approach to self-disclosure in relation to childbirth research.

personal disclosure and possibly 'betraying loyalties' to family members. This ambivalence reflects the social position of the sister relationship itself, intertwined with other intimate ties between mothers and daughters and sexual partners:

> ...'a life', whether of one's own self or another, is never composed of one decorticated person alone. Lives are composed by a variety of social networks of others that the subject of 'a life' moves between... (Stanley 1993:50)

Just as the women's emotions about taking part in the research varied so did the form of their narratives during the interview. The interview is a privileged space where a specific form of interaction, a 'social encounter' even (Ribbens 1989:579), takes place allowing both participant and researcher to construct meanings and interpretations about the sister relationship. It is this process which makes this common though taken for granted and socially 'invisible' family relationship accessible.

My very presence as researcher and sister, which I made explicit to the participants, in a sense legitimised our discussion of the research topic. My presence and implicit personal sistering experience along with the participants' enabled some elements to be voiced and others to be silenced. However, the silences themselves may have contributed to the creation of 'tacit knowledge' between us thereby creating a safe space in which the interview could proceed (Fontana and Frey 1994:371).

In the interviews, the narratives of sister relationships constructed between participants and researcher ranged from interpretation, and exploration, to resistance and silence. The women's accounts of their lives and relationships with their sisters were represented in three different forms: first, in a monologue or stream of consciousness where a thought-out interpretation was presented to me; second, in a joint exploration between participant and researcher; and third, through resistance and silence. These positions illustrate some of the dilemmas involved for women as sisters in representing a hidden relationship.

Some of the women with whom I spoke had pondered over their relationship with their sister/s at length. They had developed a reflexive and analytical perspective, a language in a sense, to depict this changing tie. For some of them, painful emotions of sadness and regret were often intertwined in their stories. Hazel, age 34, told her tale with hardly any prompting. Towards the end of the interview she meditates on this:

Hazel: I'm saying things I know, but you must have actually had conversations with people who've realised things as they're talking.
MM: Yes, yes I was thinking that er...you are quite different in that way, a lot of people at the end'll say, you know...I hadn't really thought about this much whereas...
Hazel: No, but I am very analytical..
MM: You've thought of it all in quite a lot of depth and complexity and I'm always amazed when people say that to me and I sort of think, well, yes but these are your sisters or this is your sister and I'm always quite shocked that, you know, that they haven't and it's actually quite hard work for them to...
Hazel: Sit and think it through as a...
MM: Yes and I mean I've got all these questions here and themes but with you it's just like, I haven't really had to ask you that much because...you [laughs]
Hazel: [laughs] I've done the analysis already.

Other women had also given this aspect of their lives considerable thought and the interview provided an opportunity to explore this relationship further. The marked difference is that these women did not have an overall viewpoint or interpretation and were mainly still struggling to understand it. Some of the women who had puzzled it over with a friend or their sister offered a very fluent narrative.

Rowena (37) about *Grace* (34): I find it very interesting actually, I find it very interesting...er...I don't find it difficult to be open. And I suppose maybe it's...well it's...a form in which I've said things that I haven't said to my sister at all and why is that? It's probably because I've never sat down for two hours with an agenda to talk about er...but also you can't talk about something objectively, if we talked about [the] relationship she would always pick out things from the past, ...oh I remember the time when you did this...you know and all the emotions sort of flood back in...oh yes...that was the time when you tried to pinch my boyfriend, wasn't it...I suppose we have talked but she has the ability to make things into...she always talks in a jocular way about things, so...

In other cases, the narrative was more hesitant:

Eliza (age 38):...you feel, well...strange,...I don't know whether I've told you anything, I just feel, well...I sort of warbled on, really. I wouldn't say anything that I felt that might sort of betray them...so I feel strange about that...is that what you actually want to know, all these deep inner secrets? But I wouldn't tell you [laughs]...well, certainly not on a first meeting anyway not knowing you very...I don't know you at all [laughs]. So I think, well...I'm not quite sure what you actually really do want to know. I mean, I know...

MM: You mean in the study or by talking to you?
Eliza: What are you looking for?
MM: In the study?
Eliza: Mm.

Some women had given their tie little thought, Judith (16) and Nicole (10), and Mildred (26) and Frieda (24), for example, who said:

Judith: Certain things you ask I've never thought about that, you know
Nicole: Certain things you said, makes you think of certain things you've said as well that aren't very nice.
Judith: It makes you look at the relationship between you and your sister in a different light really.

Mildred: I mean I haven't really thought much about how our relationship has really changed over the years, ...I haven't really thought about it that much, have you?
Frieda: No, I mean we know that we always used to argue a lot and now we don't at all but.
Mildred: Well we bicker...
Frieda: Well yes
Frieda: stupid little arguments, but not really.
Mildred: but it's not the same, not in the same way...um I suppose it makes you think about you know your family relationship, because you take it for granted really. That we are a close family...

And some women drew clear lines around topics that they were unwilling to discuss and resisted the researcher through their silences. Here Suzanne, age 29, encapsulates the distinction between experiences she shares with her sister *Collette*, age 25, and wants to keep personal and other elements of private life that can be voiced in the interview:

Suzanne: If we need comfort we can, we do get comfort from each other. You know, if I've, if I've got a problem or anything that I need to discuss, even there's a few things that I, I've thought I would never be able to tell anyone and I've been able to tell her. You know, she, and once I told her I found it easier to tell a few other people because we'd discussed it together.
MM: What sort of things are you thinking of?
Suzanne: Just, these are just personal things that, you know, I just really couldn't tell anyone but I, and I was really amazed that I could tell her, it was quite, I want, I needed to tell her and yeah, so it's really changed, our relationship.
MM: And does she talk to you the same way?
Suzanne: I think so, yeah.

The methodological implications of analysing different types of narratives such as these, especially when one woman relates events in more detail than does her sister, are explored in the discussion of 'allied' and 'oppositional' stories in the next chapter (see section 6).

Conclusion

A number of difficulties surface when researching and gathering data on a socially invisible relationship: first, the absence from public institutions and the research literature; and secondly, the tensions between voicing and silencing private and personal experiences in the semi-public space of the interview. Participants and researcher may feel reluctant and vulnerable to exposing emotional aspects of intimate relationships, in this case between sisters. Reasons for this include the very personal and possibly *subordinated* position of the private world in relation to the semi-public interview context and wider public institutional sphere (Johnson 1986). These dilemmas appear throughout the research process and require a sensitive approach.

Several strategies allow participants and researcher to construct narratives of a taken for granted relationship. First, the creation of an appropriate collective[16] language - through analogy with other female relationships between best friends, mothers and daughters; by reviewing changes and turning-points in individual lives and relationships; and by elaborating concepts derived from different relevant bodies of theoretical knowledge - all can facilitate representation of the research topic during the access and data collection stages.

A second strategy is to adopt a flexible approach when applying principles of feminist research to do with power relationships and reflexivity in the field. In this case experimenting with a range of positions between distancing and disclosure enabled me as researcher to locate myself at a middle-ground point. Thirdly, there is an opportunity in the interview situation for participants and researcher to create new public knowledge and represent previously hidden facets of a relationship in the construction of unique narratives: the specific status of each account - from fluent interpretation and exploration to resistance and silence - shows the women's ease and difficulty in voicing and silencing both the personal and the private.

Some of the ethical and methodological dilemmas addressed here during the fieldwork stage are further explored in the next chapter in relation to analysing and writing up the data. In addition, many of the themes to do with encapsulating and representing moments in

16 Hey (1997:129) makes this point regarding girls' friendships and homosociality.

lives and ties and producing knowledge about them are picked up on again at different phases of the research process.

Chapter IV

Method and Dilemmas of Analysis

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Introduction

This chapter describes the method of analysis adopted in the current study based on principles of the grounded theory approach, in addition to case studies and the auto/biographical method. It also considers the sites and manner in which feminist knowledge was produced in the study. It then charts the origins and development of early forms of the typology developed from the two theories, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism, and the auto/biographical method, set out in Chapter II, in conjunction with the data analysis. Next, the chapter outlines the four strands of the final version of the typology which guided the analysis of the data. Methodological dilemmas of the data analysis and representation stages are also addressed[1].

1. The method of grounded theory

I have used a version of grounded theory as a method for analysing the data. In grounded theory, the emphasis is on the process of generating theory through emerging categories from the data as opposed to the older tradition in the social sciences of verifying theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although Glaser and Strauss (1967) first conceived of grounded theory as an inductive method, I am using the method based on Strauss' (1987) reformulation of grounded theory which combines an inductive and deductive approach. In their description of the technique of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967:34-37) warn against 'forcing' data 'to fit a theory', fitting 'a category from another theory to the situation under study' and against the danger of 'data selection' rather than theory generation in the analysis process. However, while primarily an inductive approach (moving from data to theory), grounded theory also includes coming to the data with concepts, an *a priori* perspective or even some elements of 'formal theory'[2]:

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1 Sections of this chapter were originally presented at a BSA Conference (see Mauthner 1997).

2 Glaser and Strauss (1967:32) distinguish between formal and substantive theory. Formal theory corresponds to a conceptual area of enquiry, for instance feminine subjectivity, whereas substantive theory is developed for an empirical area such as the sociology of kinship/friendship. (These are my examples). There is also 'grand theory' which is 'generated from logical assumptions and speculations about the 'oughts' of social life' (Glaser and Strauss 1967:34).

> ...the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa. He (sic) must have a perspective that will help him see relevant data and abstract categories from his scrutiny of the data. (Glaser and Strauss 1967:3)

And they continue:

> To be sure one goes out and studies an area with a particular sociological perspective, and with a focus, a general question, or a problem in mind. But he (sic) can (and we believe should) also study an area without any preconceived theory that dictates, prior to the research, 'relevancies' in concepts and hypotheses. (Glaser and Strauss 1967:3)

I would argue that this last point about researching an area without any preconceived theory is difficult in practice, especially in the case of feminist research where there is a clear political agenda. I interpret this element of grounded theory as being about the use that researchers make of theory prior to and during the research process. Glaser and Strauss seem to be against researchers coming to their research topic and *data* with any theory. This view has subsequently been challenged by feminists and I return to this point in the next section. Glaser and Strauss' emphasis is on a shift in focus: they encourage researchers to draw on theory during rather than prior to the analysis stage. Grounded theory:

> ...allowing substantive concepts and hypotheses to emerge first, on their own, enables the analyst to ascertain which, if any, existing formal theory may help him generate his substantive theories. He can then be more faithful to his data, rather than forcing it to fit a theory. (Glaser and Strauss 1967:34)

This statement points to the way that as a researcher I drew on 'formal theory' in order to generate substantive theory.

In their description of the coding process and their distinction between lower level (preliminary) and higher-level categories (more abstract), Glaser and Strauss acknowledge the interplay between theory and the development of categories with which to analyse the data.

> Although categories can be borrowed from existing theory, provided that the data are continually studied to make certain that the categories fit, generating theory does put a premium on emergent conceptualisations. (Glaser and Strauss 1967:36)

In addition to theory there is also the relevant literature, the researcher's own knowledge and experience that influence the shape of coding categories. This is referred to as

'theoretical sensitivity' (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Glaser 1978) which consists of 'disciplinary or professional knowledge, as well as both research and personal experiences, that the researcher brings to his or her inquiry' (Strauss and Corbin 1994:280).

Two decades after the original formulation Strauss (1987) refined the definition of the coding at the heart of grounded theory as based on two types of codes: *in vivo codes* which stem from the language of participants and *sociologically constructed codes* 'based on a combination of the researcher's scholarly knowledge and knowledge of the substantive field under study' (Strauss 1987:33). These latter codes, he says, can add more sociological meaning to the analysis than *in vivo codes*. The notion of *sociologically constructed codes* clearly acknowledges the influence of knowledge external to the data. The feminist critique of grounded theory centres precisely on the myth of approaching data as a blank slate for 'Researchers cannot have empty heads...'. (Stanley and Wise 1990:22). As Maynard (1994:23) says: 'No feminist study can be politically neutral, completely inductive or solely based in grounded theory. This is a contradiction in terms.'

2. Grounded theory revisited

Grounded theory was the main approach that I adopted for analysing the data. I analysed the data in three simultaneous stages based on the reformulation of grounded theory as an inductive and deductive process (Strauss 1987). First, I explored the data using concepts embedded in the interview guide and the research questions that guided the study (derived from a review of relevant literature) - for example, subjectivity and power relations. Secondly, I identified at the same time themes emerging from the data - conflict, distance, pleasures, emotions and contact. I looked for patterns in the data and made comparisons across cases. Thirdly, I developed coding categories from the theoretical concepts of power relations, talk, and subjectivity derived from the two theories described in Chapter II, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism, in interaction with my data. I discuss in more detail the presence of the concept of power relations in the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses, two of the discourses of the typology that I developed, in section 4 of this chapter. My coding scheme incorporated theoretical concepts from feminist standpoint theory and post-structuralism in conjunction with themes and patterns appearing from the analysis of the data (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994; Holland 1992). The categories and concepts emerging as dominant are those most confirmed by the data: for example, the notion of power relations.

In addition to grounded theory, I also analysed the data through case studies (Stake 1994), examining patterns within and across cases and selecting for in-depth analysis those cases which best illustrated concepts or strands of the typology. Another advantage of using case

studies is that its methods are largely those 'of disciplining personal and particularised experience' (Stake 1994:245). This focus on the specific rather than the general ties in with the auto/biographical method which influenced my attention to transitions, turning-points and life events in the women's narratives. The three elements of my method of data analysis, grounded theory, case studies, and auto/biography, all have in common a constructivist epistemology. I consider the implication of this constructivist epistemology in the context of my feminist study in the next section. I return to the ethical disadvantages of using case studies in the last section of this chapter.

3. The production of feminist knowledge

I consider next the question of where and how knowledge was produced in the current study. In the following two sections of this chapter I address the question of who the knowledge is produced for and the ethical implications of making this knowledge public. One of the issues in feminist research concerns the production of knowledge when interpreting women's lives; one of the dilemmas is how to avoid setting up a power hierarchy between those whose experiences are being researched and those 'who know' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 1997). The research product emerges through a process of analysis that may not be visible at a purely 'experiential level' (Stanley and Wise 1990:24); using theory to make sense of experience, while necessary for producing sociology, inevitably distances the participants from the research product. This distance is partly due to the power relations embedded in the research process itself (Wolf 1996).

In my study, knowledge was created from the participants' lived experience and emotions, and from the narratives which they produced about these. I want to argue that it was possible to produce knowledge about their changing subjectivity by using the auto/biographical method since it brings together the material and discursive approaches emanating from the two discordant theories adopted in the study.

In my research, knowledge about these women's lives and relationships was created in a number of locations. It was created by some of the women prior to the interview. Hazel, as mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, had reflected on her experience before the interview: the narrative she produced was in effect constructed alone during the interview. This has significant implications for conceptualising subjectivity as 'active and agentic'[3] (Maynard 1995:274). Knowledge in the study was also created by the women and myself jointly in the interaction in the interview; and it was further created by myself as sister and researcher prior to and during the research process, what I refer to as the 'I' in the analysis.

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3 *Changing subjectivity* is further explored in Chapter VIII.

Here I want to make visible in a limited way the knowledge and experience which I as researcher and sister brought to the research (Strauss and Corbin 1990), what Miller (1995) calls the 'autobiography of the question', and Maynard (1994:16) and Stanley (1987:30) - the 'intellectual autobiography' of researchers. For these thinkers, 'intellectual autobiography' forms an integral part of the research and writing stages. Others call for the researcher to be reflexive in the stage of data analysis and interpretation in a number of ways by: acknowledging the specific theoretical perspectives adopted; exposing emotions and personal influence; and claiming ownership of and power to mould the final account of the research (Fontana and Frey 1994; Skeggs 1994; Ribbens 1989). In several of the interviews, I exchanged personal details about myself as sister - my relationship with my sister, reflections, experiences - and I acknowledged commonalities with the participants: this exchange contributed to my thinking throughout. In one interview, for example, I exchanged places with the participant when she started probing about the effect of the research on me. In another, the woman became concerned about my well-being and commented: 'You've looked quite stressed a couple of times, [laughter], you've almost looked as if you've got stomach ache [laughter]'. And I replied:

> MM: [laughter] No, I suppose it's just hearing about you know, the things that you struggle with, I suppose they, you know, they sound quite familiar to, um, the situations that you've described and you know, describing pain and talking about bereavement and, er, yes I mean it is quite, I find doing this work quite stressful. Yes, I do.

Clearly, my own sistering experiences coloured my interpretation of the data: it influenced the way that I listened to the women's narratives, the patterns that I noticed in the data, and the themes which I pursued and analysed.

In Chapter III (section 7), I explored how the production of knowledge in the research developed from both the women's *experiences* and *narratives* during the stage of fieldwork. This knowledge emerged through analogy with other female relationships, through a focus on transitions in relationships, and through the creation of theoretical concepts. Here, I focus on the production of knowledge during the stage of data analysis and interpretation of the women's lives and stories. I want to make links between standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism, material lives or experience, and narrative or 'knowledge produced discursively' (Nash 1994:69).

Clearly, there is a tension between standpoint theory and deconstruction regarding the knowing subject and the place of experience, emotion, memory and narrative in the construction of knowledge. These all figure in the research process: in relation to the

participants in their own lives, the participants and researcher in the interview, and the researcher herself.

One dilemma is how to hold on to knowledge/reality as both experience and narrative. These are not incompatible, according to Nash (1994), who believes that experience can be incorporated into deconstruction. Nash's project is for an understanding of knowledge as 'rhetoric' by seeing the appeal of experience for feminism as a 'rhetorical device which gives certain accounts greater authority than others' (Nash 1994:72). Nash, who draws on the work of philosophers Richard Rorty and Wilfred Sellars, makes a useful distinction between what I would call, emotion on the one hand, and reflection, which involves thinking and language, on the other. Her distinction enables us to consider experience and narrative as linked. Nor are they incompatible, according to Stanley and Wise (1990:27), who write that experience is 'located within a micro-politics localised but organised through meta-narratives and more grounded ideological discourses'.

I want to argue for the opposite of what Nash proposes: for a space to include narrative in experience/the material. In my study, knowledge stems from emotions and experience, including experience of power and positionings in different discourses, as well as from verbal accounts and reflections on this experience. The link between the two, I argue, is 'talk' about experience, culture, discourses *and* the social construction of this experience. I am equating 'talk' in this context as 'text' or 'written' and 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge' (Smith 1988 cited in Stanley and Wise 1990:34)[4]. As Maynard (1994:23) explains: 'People's accounts of their lives are culturally embedded. Their descriptions are, at the same time, a construction of the events that occurred, together with an interpretation of them'.

In addition to these dilemmas about the production of knowledge which surfaced during the process of data analysis, ethical difficulties to do with interpreting multiple perspectives of relationships also emerged. Before I explore these dilemmas, I trace the origins of the typology which I have developed for analysing sister relationships. Then I outline its four strands for the typology is relevant in the subsequent discussion of the methodological challenges of analysing these sensitive private relationships.

4. Developing a typology of sistering

In order to analyse the data I created a typology[5] rooted in concepts of power relations and negotiation, discourse or gendered talk, and subjectivity derived from the two theoretical

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4 See Chapter II, section 2.

5 A typology according to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*

perspectives, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-structuralism, and the data itself. I understand typologies to be 'classification systems made up of categories that divide some aspect of the world into parts' (Patton 1990:393). My reading of the empirical and theoretical literature on kinship, friendship, gendered subjectivity and researching women's lives (Maynard and Purvis 1994) in conjunction with my analysis of the data led me to formulate a typology of sister relationships. First, I lay out the history of the development of the typology before discussing it in more detail in the next section.

I developed, as other researchers have, a typology based on the concepts of contact, emotions, and talk in order to answer the research question about what kinds of ties exist between sisters (de Vaus 1994; Ribbens 1994; Mansfield and Collard 1988). In the early stages of analysis, I worked with two experimental typologies which I called I A and I B before later devising a more sophisticated typology, typology II, which I subsequently applied in systematic coding to the data (see Mauthner 1995). These early typologies, I A and I B, reflect the difficulties involved in conceptualising this particular personal relationship. I devised the first typology I A by trying to 'fit in' all the examples of sister ties that I had collected into the following categories in order to capture the differences between them:

Typology I A

- distant
- strong bond but not best friends
- best friend

I found the second category 'strong bond but not best friends' to be the most common in the data. Then I realised that the other two categories, 'distant' and 'best friend', were too vague. These terms did not adequately reflect the multiple combinations: for example, that some of the women in the study had different understandings of 'distant' and 'friends', and that others who had a one-sided relationship felt distant and sad about it or distant and content.

It was only when I started to analyse and code every transcript in detail that I devised a more refined typology based on some of the key concepts of talk, emotions and power relations. Typology I B comprises more detailed categories. Both typologies could apply to both kin and non-kin relationships:

(Brown 1993) designates the branch of knowledge that deals with classes with common characteristics; it also refers to the classification especially of human behaviour or characteristics according to type. For an empirical example of a typology, see de Vaus' (1994) classification of parent-child relationships into four types: parent-centred, child-centred, remote and attached.

Typology I B

1. Motherly: care and responsibility, protective, one-sided, duty
2. Friendship a: she's there for me, I'm there for her, friendly, not emotionally close, voluntary (not duty)
3. Friendship b: mutual, give and take, listening, voluntary (not duty), emotionally close
4. Best friendship: friendship b + longing of her presence + physical affection + possessiveness

These categories in typology I B were more detailed than the earlier ones and yet they remained problematic: was the fact that they could be applied to both kin and non-kin a strength or a weakness? One of the limitations of these two experimental typologies stems from the difficulties inherent in trying to apply a typology to something as fluid and changeable as personal relationships. Relationships are in constant flux and therefore difficult to pin down. A second limitation is that a typology does not necessarily adequately represent contradictory emotions about sisters or friends. Typologies such as the ones above do not embody changes in the power balance that occur within relationships or reflect issues and tensions to do with loyalty. Moreover, they do not encompass unresolved aspects of relationships as illustrated by several examples in the data where women have a distant relationship with their sisters which they feel negative or unhappy about.

Yet typology I B contained many of the salient themes in the data which I wanted to explore: emotions (care, longing, possessiveness), talk (listening), changing relationships (motherly, voluntary) and different types of tie (friendship, best friendship). In the early stage of analysis, it was difficult to make links between these themes or establish meaningful connections between them. Further analysis however revealed that typology I B, which I developed gradually, contained all the elements of the final typology II, in an embryonic form. The motherly category with its notions of care, responsibility and protectiveness evolved into the *positioned* discourse. The second and third categories of distinct kinds of friendship developed into the *close* and *distant companionship* strand, and the best friendship category remained the *best friendship* strand[6]. The notions of mutuality and give and take were later encompassed in the *shifting positions* discourse. The language used to refer to the different types of sister tie also changed: category was exchanged and replaced by strand, a term more suggestive I felt of the fluidity and lack of permanence of these features of relationships.

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6 Mansfield and Collard (1988) use the term 'companionate marriage' and Whitehead (1976) uses the expression 'close companionship' regarding married women's friendships.

Thus I developed typology II, with its four strands, in order to interpret narratives of sister relationships: *best friendship*; *companionship* based on varying notions of 'distance' both positive and negative; the *positioned* discourse which reproduces elements of mother-daughter relationships; and the *shifting positions* discourse where role reversals occur. The final typology, II, incorporates ideas from the two earlier typologies, I A and I B:

Typology II

1. *Best friendship*
2. *Close* and *distant companionship*
3. The *positioned* discourse
4. The *shifting positions* discourse

This final version of the typology is outlined in the next section.

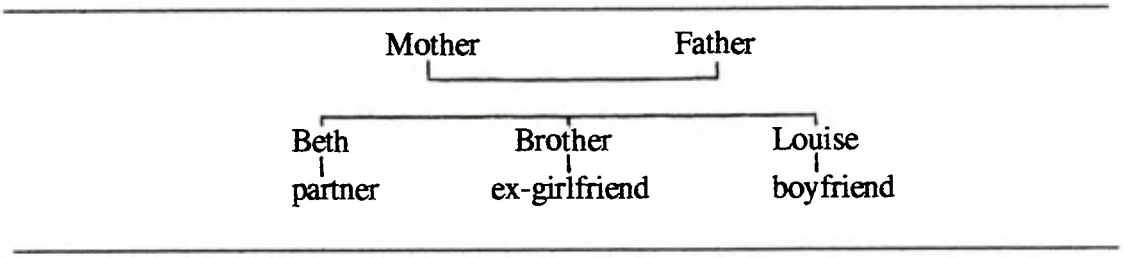
5. A typology for analysing sister relationships

The typology is made up of four strands: these can permeate each other and coexist within one relationship as sisters move from one strand to the other at a single moment in time or over a period of time. The first two strands of the typology, *best friendship* and *companionship*, are explored further in Chapters V and VI. Chapter V describes each of these strands. Chapter VI explores shifts from *best friendship* to *companionship* through changes which occur in the relationships over time. The other two strands, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses, are examined in detail in Chapter VII. The *best friendship* and *companionship* strands are more descriptive tools for categorising the different forms that sister relationships take. The two discourses, *positioned* and *shifting positions*, on the other hand, are more analytical tools for conceptualising power relations and changing subjectivity. I now set out the typology through the discussion of a case study of Beth and Louise's *distant companionship*.

Illustration of the typology: a case study of Beth and Louise

Beth and Louise were interviewed separately. Louise, age 22, had just completed her degree and Beth, age 27, the eldest, was training to be a dentist. The sisters live in different cities: Louise in the north and Beth in the south. Louise travelled south and I interviewed her at Beth's home where she was over nighting. Their parents are Scottish though the family home is in the north of England. Their brother Colin was temporarily living with Beth and her partner. Louise lives with her boyfriend. The sisters are white, of working-class origin and could be described currently as middle class. Here is a figure of their family:

Figure 2: Beth and Louise's family of origin



Companionship

Beth and Louise's relationship is one of *distant companionship* associated with low levels of contact, talk, intimacy, reciprocity and emotional closeness. *Close companionship*, described more fully in the next chapter, is a midway stage between *distant companionship* and *best friendship*. Beth and Louise describe their tie in similar ways:

> Beth: I probably wouldn't phone her just to see how she was. And we really wouldn't, there'd probably be a reason for it...yeah, I wouldn't just phone her up for a chat I don't think. [...] with my sister I wouldn't think of her, I don't see her as I see my friends. I'm not as close to her as I'm close to, you know, most of my friends, but I'd never, well I'm probably quite protective of her, I guess.

> Louise: I think we sort of get on with each other, we always nearly sort of have done. And I think because we've never really sort of been that intimate with each other er...never really discussed anything really really personal, I don't think...er...and because we live so far apart, we don't really, I suppose we talk to each other, you know, sort of on the phone throughout the year mainly to discuss, you know, I'm coming down here or something, I need to stop over on my way to somewhere else, usually about my mum's birthday or something, and arranging a present or whatever, that kind of thing

In contrast with companionship, *best friendship* is characterised by a high level of contact, talk, intimacy, reciprocity and emotional closeness. Whereas *best friendship* was a term used by many of the sisters, the other three elements of the typology were coined by me. The two other strands of the typology are considered next.

The positioned discourse

The *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses may contradict and yet co-exist within the dominant strand of *companionship*. Thus, two sisters who consider each other companions or best friends may also experience other dimensions of their relationship as *positioned* or as part of a role reversal, with *shifting positions*. How do these discourses appear in Beth and Louise's narratives of their relationship?

The *positioned* discourse would appear to reproduce elements of mother-daughter relationships as documented in the literature - in empirical and auto/biographical accounts and reflections on motherhood and mothering as experience, institution, and discourse[7]. The *positioned discourse* can be equated with the concept of the 'minimother' (Edelman 1994): the minimother is usually associated with the 'big sister' role and the child with the 'little sister'. My use of the term 'minimothering' takes account of its material production in the family and includes the notion of agency or agentic subjectivity. Thus, although minimothering is formed in a specific gendered context, it also exists through the way that women's subjectivities are invested in it, to use Hollway's (1989) term.

Findings from empirical studies have influenced my understanding of the term minimother and elaboration of the *positioned discourse*. Adkins and Leonard's (1993) work examined the domestic and caring work carried out by daughters in households. They draw links between girls' family work and the production of gender and class in relation to schooling and educational opportunities. Both Edelman's idea of minimothering and Adkins and Leonard's concept of family work highlight specific material circumstances in which these gendered practices emerge. Finch and Mason (1993) in their study on material and emotional exchange among kin stress the way that reciprocity and responsibility are negotiated among individual family members, thereby allowing for the possibility of agency in these interactions. These ideas of caring work and family work, the presence or absence of negotiation around reciprocity and responsibility for giving and receiving material and emotional services are embedded in my use of the term minimother. In conjunction with the themes emanating from the data regarding differences and similarities between mother-daughter[8] and sister relationships, contradictory aspects of the term minimother - its constraints and pleasures - have contributed to the development of the *positioned discourse* strand of the typology.

With regard to Beth and Louise, Beth became a minimother in their family from a young age, looking after her two younger siblings as her mother worked outside the home. In this sense, she was *positioned* by her mother as carer and domestic worker:

> Beth: ...I see myself in some ways as being separate from my brother and sister because I was sort of, I had to look after them and my mum worked and she had a lot of problems with my dad over working and so I sort of, and he felt that she couldn't look after the house and work at the same time

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7 See Henwood (1995); Nice (1992); Apter (1990); Fischer (1986); Chernin (1984); Rich (1984); Cohler and Grunebaum (1981).

8 Much of the data consists of participants' lengthy and detailed accounts of their relationships with their mothers.

so I kind of took over her role in the house from quite an early age. I mean, I was probably, I was in primary school

Here is Louise's account of the same phenomenon:

Louise: Beth looked after us a lot and stuff like that, she was the eldest child and she looked after the two of us, so she was round us a lot and er....I don't know, she always seemed to be the boss or whatever, I suppose in that way that she was left in charge

The sisters' references to Beth's role as the 'boss' who 'took over, 'looked after' and was 'left in charge' clearly reflect the material practice of mothering in which she was involved. There was also an emotional dimension to this caring work which Beth describes with feelings of ambivalence. Beth was also positioned as her mother's emotional confidante:

Beth: I spent most of my time just listening to her problems, and things about my dad and whatever and um she still expects that, it's like this one way thing and I find that very difficult now. And that's one of the reasons I didn't go home for a long time. I kind of, when I got aware and actually realised, you know, hey God, you know, this isn't on, really. It's sort of like a role reversal, I think, in a lot of ways.

Here, Beth is hinting at the way that she, as daughter, and her mother, have swapped places in a sense, regarding the emotional aspect of mothering. I return to this idea in a case study of Jeanne in Chapter VII.

In addition, Beth positions *herself* as responsible and protective of Louise: she seems to recognise her own 'investment' in the minimother role, in a way that is reminiscent of Hollway's (1989) account of the investments women and men have in positioning themselves in different discourses of sexuality. As Beth says of Louise:

Beth: I'm not as close to her as I'm close to, you know, most of my friends, but I'd never well I'm probably quite protective of her, I guess.

Beth's positioning by her mother as carer and emotional confidante and by herself as 'protector' of Louise operates at two levels: in relation to her younger siblings and in relation to her mother. In the interview, Beth draws links between this positioning as carer and emotional confidante and the conflict in her relationship with her mother. Beth attempts to name this process to her mother in order to resist it. Her strategy is problematic and leads to conflict with her mother, and as a result mother and daughter have little contact. However a different situation emerges between the two sisters. Beth's positioning as carer and

protector slightly changes when she leaves home to study. This brings us to the last strand of the typology to do with the way that these subject positions can change over time within a relationship.

The shifting positions discourse

The fourth strand of the typology, the *shifting positions* discourse, captures moments in relationships when role reversals occur illustrating the post-structuralist notion of power as diffuse and fluctuating rather than fixed. Bloom and Munro (1995:99) explain the way that these subject positions constitute identity: 'Our concern is to theorise the subject as a 'site of identity production' (Gilmore 1994:14) which recognises the subject as constructed at the nexus of multiple subject positions.' For Bloom and Munro, these 'readings of subjectivity [...] acknowledge women's conflicted subject positions'. Examples of these tensions between different and coexisting subject positions are present in Beth and Louise's relationship.

Beth looks back at her positioning as a minimother and recalls that, to some extent, this role diminished when she left home in her late teens to go to university. At the same time, Louise became positioned by her mother as her emotional confidante. Eventually the sisters talked about this practice and Beth describes the way that this led to greater contact between her and Louise:

> Beth: ...we sort of talk about um about my mum because my mum and dad were sort of splitting up and mum had been really depressed and it was sort of um mum trying to, I think she [Louise] was sort of, had to take on this role that I'd had, and um, so I suppose we do talk a lot more now and we kind of have the, and we have the same point of view on things, I suppose. And, but I think yeah, yeah, so I suppose it has got better, it has got better when I think about it, um.

Her remarks about 'it getting better' summarise some of the changes in her relationship with Louise through which they have become closer in their adult years. Louise echoes these changes in their relationship when she considers the limitations of the little sister position and the possibility of moving away from this aspect of the *positioned* discourse by *shifting positions*:

> MM: I mean you said, you know, she called you the little sister. Do you think that can...it's possible to grow out of that, of being the little...?
> Louise: Yes, I think...yes, I think, I sort of did really, and I think that's maybe why there was a strain when Beth left that...the relationship I suppose was changing and...I wasn't sort of looking to her and she wasn't sort of...guiding me as her little sister anymore either, so I suppose I wasn't

so cute anyway [laughs]...er...yeah, I think maybe that's one of the reasons why it's a bit more strained.
MM: So when do you think that happened? Or started to happen?
Louise: I suppose when Beth left, to go to university this would be 85/86. It would be about then. I think when she came back from Africa she'd stopped treating me so much like a little sister.

Beth's departure from home for university and travel abroad marked an important turning-point in the sisters' relationship, the end for Louise of Beth treating and 'guiding' her as a little sister (even if Beth admits to her continuing feelings of protectiveness towards Louise). Their relationship does not present a role reversal, although Beth and Louise exchanged places to some extent in relation to their mother. This is not an example of Louise becoming Beth's big sister as occurs in other sisters' narratives in the study: for example, *Collette* in relation to Suzanne, or Hazel regarding Phoebe (see Chapter VII). Nevertheless, their positions have shifted in relation to their mother and to each other as indicated by Louise saying that Beth no longer treats her as a little sister.

Next, I explore differences between the sisters to do with how they each feel about their relationship in the present. Do they feel the same way? Whereas Beth says that 'it has got better', Louise notes the strain and tension in the relationship. This apparent contradiction runs through each of their narratives and raises questions about how to analyse their competing stories (Song 1998). I examine the issue of competing accounts in more detail in the rest of the chapter.

6. Ethical and methodological dilemmas

The case study of Beth and Louise relies on their separate versions of their relationship. A strength of comparing their stories in this way, of 'using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning' (Stake 1994:241), is the resulting triangulation of the data. However, the ethical costs of adopting a case study approach are many. In this section, particular attention is paid to three ethical issues: the difficulties of interpreting multiple perspectives of relationships, the challenges of analysing different versions of relationships, and the question of varying degrees of disclosure in interviews with sisters from the same family set.

Interpreting multiple perspectives of relationships

Interpreting different angles of a relationship was especially problematic in the 16 separate interviews with related sisters and with sets of sisters - where I interviewed three and four sisters, from two families, separately. These difficulties present in the case of a pair such as Beth and Louise were magnified in the family sets. One woman to whom I spoke first was acutely aware of this issue and raised it as we discussed the possibility of an interview with her sister which I carried out several months later:

> ...she'll probably tell you a completely different story but then...that's how it should be, she should tell you her side, her story. I mean, I've always said, there's three sides to every story, one person's side, the other person's side and somewhere in the middle, you get the truth, but it is in the middle, it's not there or there.

The dilemma here is twofold: on the one hand, there is the question of one woman making information public about her sister which the sister herself does not disclose. Here are my comments about this after an interview midway through fieldwork:

> She spoke from an insider's position and took it for granted that I was an insider too. I realise how little I find out about the respondent sometimes compared to the amount of info I learn about the sister. I have had this feeling that I am going to find out all sorts of things from the 'other halves'. (Fieldnotes)

The second dimension of the dilemma is the issue of truth claims about any one individual narrative. The rest of this chapter considers various attempts to address the problems of confidentiality and truth claims at both the levels of data analysis and representation in the public realm.

The tensions surrounding confidentiality in the research process raise questions to do with boundaries between the personal, the private and the semi-public in the interview situation. I felt ambivalent about my ability to preserve the women's identity from other participants, in this case their sisters, once they had disclosed information in the semi-public space of the interview, which remains secret in their private lives. Next, I address the question of truth claims before considering the ethics of preserving confidentiality in the writing up process.

Analysing 'allied' and 'oppositional' stories

Comparing separate stories of similar events in relationships touches on questions of truth and reality, validity and power in the research process. These are some of the methodological dilemmas emerging during the stage of data analysis when interpreting stories of relationships. They occur specifically when sisters are companionate rather than best friends and when they have constructed their narratives individually rather than together.

The *best friend* sisters to whom I spoke produced similar versions of events and tended to feel the same way about changes in their relationship or subjectivity. Mildred (26) and

Frieda (24), for example, produced a joint account about how Mildred had changed after she split up with her first boyfriend Luke and travelled abroad:

> Mildred: Well she's told me, she's told me that I've changed.
> Frieda: Yes, she has definitely. Well I mean, when she was at university she was...basically she lived with this guy, you've got to let me speak. And er...
> MM: [laughs]
> Frieda: I mean, I was really good friends with Luke and, you know, we all got on really well and he was a really nice guy, but Mildred was quite, you know, she did what Luke...wanted her, you know, [...] and basically she just sort of spent most weekends with him and doing whatever he had organised.
> Mildred: OK, my life revolved around his for a while.
> Frieda: [...] this is my theory, and she was really happy. And although she wasn't particularly independent she was...I don't know, she was happy with the way things were and then she went off, still seeing Luke at the time and during those two years they actually split up, obviously there was distance between them
> Mildred: when I was travelling
> Frieda: and by the time I got back Mildred had really changed. I mean she was much more independent and sort of, her whole outlook on life had changed... I don't know, it's really weird but...I mean now...she's so much more, she knows her own mind, she's...she's extremely independent and she's also quite, I don't know how to put it...hyper, whereas before she was really laid back and now she worries about everything, she worries about money and
> Mildred: [under her breath] it's true actually
> Frieda: ....um getting things organised in time, work, everything. She hasn't done enough exercise or something, what she eats, she worries about everything, and it's really weird to see the change. I mean we still get on as well as ever, she's just [a] totally different person in that way. [...]
> Mildred: Yeah, yeah I must say I have changed a lot.
> Frieda: Mm.
> Mildred: Um...
> Frieda: I'm sure it's because of men, a man.
> Mildred: Well, yes but it's also because of...starting working and that kind of thing
> Frieda: Yeah.

What is interesting about Mildred and Frieda's account of the changes that Mildred underwent in the recent past, is that Frieda is the main narrator and Mildred assents to and briefly corroborates her sister's account of her own changing subjectivity and of some of the relevant factors: boyfriends, travel, starting work. The way that Frieda highlights both positive and negative changes, Mildred's greater independence and increased anxiety, her former laid back mode versus her new hyper mode, is significant. It displays the breadth of Frieda's knowledge of her sister's story.

In the joint accounts of relationships produced by best friend sisters who spoke to me together such as Mildred and Frieda, the presence of discrepancies or disagreements between them was considerably diminished, or at least acknowledged by them in the interview in front of each other (see Zoe's account of her anger at Sofia's 'bunking' off from school in Chapter V, section 1).

The main difference between *companionate* and *best friend* sisters is that *best friend* sisters disagree or agree to disagree either privately or in the semi-public space of the interview whereas *companionate* sisters refrain from this. In the case of *companionate* sisters the contradictions remain silenced in the private world of their relationship, but emerge in the research process where they are visible to and interpreted by the researcher. Before pondering on the ethics of this dilemma, I display some examples of these contradictions in Beth and Louise's narratives.

Beth and Louise's narratives of their relationship reveal elements upon which they agree and others upon which they disagree: what is significant is that their reflections and feelings about this surface during the interview and the research process but not in their relationship itself, where they are implicit. They agree on the kind of relationship that they have, *companionate* rather than *best friends*. I am calling this an 'allied' story, borrowing this term from Song's (1998) research on siblings as opposed to an 'oppositional' story where different versions of events or emotions are presented. Here is an example of how Beth and Louise each feel about the amount of *closeness* in their relationship:

> Beth: in some ways because I haven't um, had much to do with Louise, I, it sort of makes me really wonder why I haven't, and um, I don't sort of regret it in any way but I think it would be nice to have quite, it would be nice to have a sort of, a close, I think it would be nice, but maybe it wouldn't, it may be awful
>
> Louise: ...maybe it would [be] nicer to have more of an intimate relationship but I'm not sure I want it. I think maybe it would be nice but at the same time I do like my privacy, definitely. I don't really sort of regret that [the] relationship...isn't really, you know, intimate...er....I don't know really, I don't really have sort of, any regrets...I'm quite happy with the way things are generally.

What is striking about these extracts is the similarity of the terms the sisters use in their separate interviews. They each use almost identical words: 'I don't (really) sort of regret' and 'it would be nice'. They both feel ambivalent about wanting and not wanting more closeness. Beth fears that it may be 'nice', but it may be 'awful'; Louise values her privacy.

Another example which shows up the distance between them concerns *doting* in relation to the big/little sister dynamic. Beth seems slightly naive here about her *position* as the big sister and its impact on Louise. Louise, however, appears very aware of her *position* as the little sister and ambivalent about the tensions, benefits and disadvantages around remaining a little sister or experimenting with *shifting positions*.

> Beth: ...I don't think she'd ever, she's not the sort of person that would ever come, she's not the sort of person that would sort of, I can't imagine her ever looking up to anybody in particular or you know, don't know. What do you reckon? [addressing her brother Colin] And kind of holding either of us as a sort of big brother or big sister kind of. She'd never dote after us, you know like, but no, she's kind of too...
>
> Louise: ...I still sort of feel that she is my big sister and that what she does is important and what she says to me is important. I suppose in some ways I'd like her not to be quite so important to me, in some ways...and yet, at the same time, I like having someone there that I can ask sort of things of, or I can look to and think, maybe that's alright, maybe it isn't, but...I don't know, really.

The 'oppositional' accounts raise ethical issues to do with preserving the sisters' anonymity (from each other and the reader) in representing the emotions and power relations in their relationship in a way which the 'allied' stories do not. In one sense I, as researcher, became a mediator between family members. However, I was not a direct mediator as Hey (1997:121) was with the schoolgirls she researched who 'frequently used my interest in understanding their friendship as an opportunity to speak to each other about difficulties which were previously unvoiced.' On the contrary, many of the participants who did experience difficulties in their relationships were the ones who opted to talk to me separately.

Although I resisted the therapist role during fieldwork, my role in the separate interviews, was that of an indirect mediator and closer to that of therapist than I wished. Lieblich (1996) found herself placed in a similar role when close relatives confessed information to her, but not to one another, during her research on life in an Israeli kibbutz - a small and closed community. The parallels between her research and mine illuminate dilemmas of collecting life histories from individuals in a closed community:

> I seemed to open a Pandora's box: out came old wounds, long forgotten or hidden from the public eye. The emotional sessions gradually escalated, and people often cried or expressed anger. [...] Whereas my concern was for

> protecting every individual separately and each one vis-a-vis the community, the dyadic complications were hard to fathom. (Lieblich 1996:177-182)

Some of the participants in Lieblich's study experienced emotional distress when the research findings were made public. Next, I consider in more detail these methodological issues inherent in interpreting stories of relationships and of private life.

Degrees of disclosure

Talking to companionate sisters separately presents difficulties about respecting the anonymity of each narrative and interpreting multiple accounts of relationships (Song 1998). The issue of anonymity in representing emotions and power relations in private lives is complex, mirroring the intricacies of verbalising these in sisters' relationships with each other. The difficulty is compounded when the research topic is the relationships themselves. Applying feminist principles during the data analysis and writing up of the research highlights several dilemmas, some of which emerged during fieldwork as mentioned in Chapter III.

The central dilemma during the analysis and representation stages concerns the question of loyalty to the women who spoke to me. In the field I was intent on preserving confidentiality between related sisters from one interview to the next and not disclosing any information from one woman to the other. It was easy enough to operate as a blank slate in each interview and not reveal any prior information in subsequent interviews. Several women described various 'rules of disclosure' that operated in their relationships to do with preserving or revealing secrets and confidences among sisters. In the same way, these rules applied during the research process. Here is an example from a pair of sisters in their thirties to whom I spoke separately. Rosemary (age 30) was explicit about not wanting her older sister Alice (age 36) knowing what she had divulged to me:

> Rosemary: What time are you seeing Alice?
> MM: I'm seeing her at 3.30 when she comes home from...
> Rosemary: That will be interesting, I'll ring her later [laughs]. Does she get to know any of what I've told you?
> MM: No, that's what I want to say because I've done this before although not usually on the same day.
> Rosemary: Because that could cause friction couldn't it? [laughs]

This dilemma is about preserving the women's identity from other participants, in this case their sisters, when they have disclosed information in the interview to the researcher, which remains secret in their private lives[9]. Representing their relationship stories requires me as researcher to be selective in order to respect their anonymity without losing any insights from the analysis. In some instances, I have quoted from the women not even using even their pseudonym (see above, at the beginning of this section, and Chapter VII, section 5). The case study of Beth and Louise illustrates the impossible task of representing the emotions and power relations that characterise their relationship and still preserving confidentiality between them. At the most, anonymity rather than confidentiality can be assured.

Another dilemma is to do with different degrees of disclosure in separate interviews when one woman talks more openly for example about both herself and her 'other half' than her sister does. This occurred during the interviews with Alice, Rosemary and their older sister Eliza (age 38). They each talked to me with varying degrees of openness. Alice and Rosemary talked more openly than Eliza who remained the most circumspect and also felt the most uncomfortable during the interview:

> Eliza: I wouldn't say anything that I felt that might sort of betray them ...so I feel strange about that ...is that what you actually want to know, all these deep inner secrets, but I wouldn't tell you [laughs]...well certainly not on a first meeting anyway, not knowing you very....I don't know you at all [laughs]!

Eliza was the least revealing of the sisters whereas Rosemary and Alice shared several personal details about which of their sisters is best at keeping secrets and who they turn to as 'first port of call' regarding work or sexual relationship issues. Perhaps their openness is linked to their position as little sisters in relation to Eliza. Another interpretation may be that they have different kinds of relationships with each other, partly owing to their different marital statuses. For Alice who is single and lives alone, her sisters form a key part of her social network. Eliza, however, lives with her partner and children and has friends outside, in addition to her kin group. The sisters' varied social statuses affects the type of relationship they have with each other: these differences are reflected in the degrees of disclosure about their relationship during the interview.

These dilemmas to do with preserving anonymity rather than confidentiality and taking account of a range of degrees of disclosure when representing intimate relationships are not

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9 A linked dilemma is the presence in the study, through their sisters' narratives, of women who declined to take part in the research. The names of these 'involuntary participants' are in italics throughout.

easily resolved. They are connected to the difficulty of the inevitable process of objectifying the women with whom I formed a relationship when making their lives 'public'. From an ethical point of view, I decided as a general principle of data analysis throughout the study not to represent any information that, for example Alice revealed about Rosemary which Rosemary did not reveal to me. In this sense, I privileged information received 'directly' and let lie 'indirect' information.

Nevertheless, there is perhaps an element of betrayal intrinsic to research based on life histories: 'Doing this work, then, requires that we find a way to encompass contradictions and make our peace with them.' (Josselson 1996:xiii). I decided, like Chase (1996) who researched the work narratives of women school heads, not to give the participants editorial control over my interpretations. Although some researchers have returned to their interviewees with tapes of their interviews to listen to or transcripts and their analysis of these as an attempt to break down the hierarchy between researcher and subjects, I did not (Hey 1997; Lieblich 1996; Skeggs 1994; Frazer 1988a). My relationship with the participants did not take the form of an 'exchange' in this sense (Berik 1996:69): at the most we exchanged experiences and knowledge of sistering during fieldwork and I promised them a summary of the study's main findings after its completion[10].

As I exited the field, I tried to leave the relationships as intact as I had found them except for the effect of participation in the research itself. As mentioned in the previous chapter (see section 4), the participants expressed mixed feelings about their involvement in the study, with some more positive and enthusiastic than others. Clearly, the effect of participation on their sister relationships is difficult to ascertain and beyond the scope of this study. Out of respect and sensitivity for complex personal ties, my aim was to safeguard the women's relationships as I found them and adopt a position of non-intervention in their lives (Berik 1996). Unlike other researchers (Hey 1997; Lieblich 1996; Cotterill 1992; Stacey 1988), I decided, after leaving the field, not to pursue further active contact with the participants apart from the few who I have met again in my social networks and have not discussed the research with in any detail.

These methodological and ethical dilemmas reflect the tension between 'hanging on to' real lives and experiences and constructing an artifact for public consumption. While the researcher's task is to ensure that the public product remains as faithful to the participants' experiences as possible, inevitably the end result while 'providing theoretical accounts

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10 See my discussion of reflexivity in the data analysis process earlier in this chapter (section 3). Berik (1996) reflecting on her research with women carpet weavers in rural Turkey does not equate the absence of an 'exchange' between participants and researcher - intervening in order to improve their working conditions, for example - as unethical.

continuous with experience' (Stanley 1993:201) reflects the researcher's interpretation and construction of the narratives displayed. Other aspects of the research which make these dilemmas problematic relate to: the nature of the material itself, emotional and private on the one hand and concerning power relations between women on the other - a relatively little discussed and perhaps taboo topic; a hidden and invisible relationship; a relationship replete with its own silenced and suppressed stories; and the personal echoes for me as sister myself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the method of analysis used in the study based on grounded theory, case studies and the auto/biographical method. I have also highlighted dilemmas to do with producing feminist knowledge. I have traced the origins of the typology elaborated for interpreting sister relationships and described each of its four strands. The typology incorporates emotions and power relations as significant practices for constructing ties of *companionship* and *best friendship.* I have also sketched the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses of the typology. I have touched on dilemmas emerging both during the process of analysing sisters' narratives and of representing these. Part of the difficulty stems from examining not only women's experiences of their relationships with their sisters but, in addition, exploring the webs of ties that women as sisters are involved in from multiple perspectives. Another source of these dilemmas is my ambiguous role as both 'insider', as sister myself, and as researcher or 'outsider' in the case of women who reveal information to me previously undisclosed to their kin.

Chapter V

Best Friendship and Companionship

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Best Friendship and Companionship

Introduction

This chapter considers the first two descriptive strands of the typology - two forms that sister relationships can take, *best friendship* and *companionship*. It draws on some of the ideas identified in Chapter I to do with contrasting notions of sociability and friendliness, on the one hand (Allan 1977a), and intimacy, confiding, compatibility, positive affection, mutuality, reciprocity and commitment, on the other (Hey 1997; Oliker 1989). The next chapter charts changes in relationships over time, from *best friendship* to *companionship* and vice-versa; and then Chapter VII examines the two analytic strands of the typology: the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses.

This chapter seeks to answer the research question about the nature of the different types of ties and contact patterns that exist between sisters. It does this by focusing on contact, talk, and emotions in the relationships. Each section considers the different forms that sister relationships can take - *best friendship*, *close* and *distant companionship* - through general illustrative material from the data and through three case studies. In these case studies of teenagers Zoe and Sofia, and women in their thirties, Lauren and her three sisters, and Rowena and *Grace*, *best friendship* and *companionship* are the defining though not the only characteristic of these women's relationships with their sister at the time of the interview.

The four strands of the typology operate at different levels: the first two are descriptive, the other two, analytic. These strands can permeate each other and co-exist within one relationship, with sisters moving from one to the other. The first strand, *best friendship*, is characterised by a high level of contact, talk, intimacy and emotional closeness. Some women themselves, and I as researcher, used this term as illustrated by excerpts from Mildred and Frieda, and Zoe and Sofia's narratives in the next section.

Companionship on the other hand, a word not used by the participants, is associated with lower levels of contact, talk, intimacy and emotional closeness. The women used expressions such as 'not close', 'not as close', 'never close', 'distant' or 'one-sided'. Some sisters whose relationship is one of *companionship* have more contact and are more intimate than others. In order to distinguish between them I have used the terms *close* and

distant companionship. Out of the 37 women interviewed, 14 women had a tie of *best friendship* with their sister, 13 one of *close companionship*, and 10 of *distant companionship*. Next I turn to the meanings accorded to *best friendship*.

1. Best friendship: 'we get on like a house on fire'

Best friendship can occur between teenage sisters and women in their forties as the case study in this section and those in other chapters demonstrate. Its main features are contact, talk and emotions. Fourteen women described their tie as one of *best friendship*: this tie is closely linked to the type and frequency of contact patterns between them which range from daily to weekly and termly contact. Table 8 summarises the type and frequency of contact according to geographical proximity in the women's current relationships.

Table 8: Best friendship contact patterns

Geographical proximity	Type of contact	Frequency
Sisters who live together		
Zoe and Sofia	Leisure activities, socialising	Daily contact
Mildred and Frieda	Leisure activities, sport, socialising	Daily contact
Sisters who live in same city		
Rae and Bukhi	Socialising, phonecalls, childcare	Weekly contact
Revi and Vandana	Phonecalls, cooking	Several times a week
Suzanne and *Collette*[1]	Sport, phonecalls	Several times a week
Leila and *Annar*	Socialising, support, see each other with children	Weekly
Sisters who live in different cities		
Chloe and Annabel	Socialising, phonecalls, family events, letters	Termly contact
Hazel and Phoebe	Family events, phonecalls, see each other with children	Fortnightly

Best friendship is not dependent on frequency of contact alone. The patterns vary considerably according to changes in the women's lives to do with life stage and life events. Whereas Zoe (17) and Sofia (16), Mildred (26) and Frieda (24), live together and have entwined social networks, Revi (21) and Vandana (25) who live in different neighbourhoods of the same city, go to great lengths to phone and see each other. Vandana

1 The women whose names appear in italics in this table and in Tables 9 and 10 in this chapter did not take part in the study.

who lives with her in-laws, enjoys less freedom than Revi who lives in her own home. These two have many experiences in common: they each married a man living in the UK and gave birth to their first child at a similar time. Other relationships like those between Leila (40) and *Annar* (38), and Hazel (34) and Phoebe (35), where the depth of the bond and understanding between them rather than the frequency of contact determines their *best friendship*, are explored in Chapters VI and VII respectively.

These contact patterns depend on a number of factors: geographical proximity, marital status and living arrangements. They vary in frequency and regularity and take different forms: sisters keep in touch by phone, letters and see each other both alone and often with their partners and children. Revi and Vandana who described their *best friendship* in a joint account, emphasised how they enjoy spending time and talking together: 'I like to be with, I like to stay with her [laugh] each other', Vandana said. And Revi highlighted the way that they glance back at their past and the intimacy of their contact: 'We are talking about our life, you know, when we are small [...] my personal things, you know my family and like this, I never, I speak with my sister and never speak with anyone [else]'.

Another pair of sisters in their twenties, Mildred and Frieda, aged 26 and 24, live together in a shared house and describe themselves as 'best buddies':

> Frieda: [...] ...I mean Mildred comes up in my conversations the whole time at work everywhere, and it's always like living with her. It's like anyone you live with really. Like if you're living with your best buddy or...
> Mildred: Is that how you see me now as a best buddy?
> Frieda: Yeah I do, and I mean...everyone knows you at work even though they haven't all met you because you just talk about them and...
> Mildred: yeah I talk about you quite a lot as well.
> Frieda: I don't do it consciously, I just suppose...at the moment because you play a major role in my life, so.

Mildred and Frieda use the term 'best friends' to describe their relationship:

> Mildred: At the moment it's very good, I mean...you know, we're like best friends in a way and we talk about everything. Have a laugh, I mean, we do quite a lot of things socially as well together.
> Frieda: Yeah, yeah, I mean, it's totally different when you're living together because I think um...like as I said before, when you're living together you just get on well, it's like living with a best friend you just...you take each other for granted really, you don't really...I mean, I don't know if...if you haven't seen someone for a long time, it's really excellent to see them...an' you're, I don't know, you just have so much to catch up on but when you're living with someone, whether it be your sister or your best friend you just, I don't know, you see each other every day and therefore...you know...I mean

> we just basically share...everything, and we talk about everything. I don't think there isn't anything that I wouldn't...
> Mildred: Mm. And that's why it's quite nice living with her because you can just, you can just be yourself, you don't have to act, you can relax...

They socialise, exercise, eat and cook together, and describe their time together - from their enjoyment of their knowledge of each other, to shopping and laughing together:

> Frieda: Yeah...and it's really funny because, you know, when you know what the other one is thinking because you know someone so well and you just look at them and you just know exactly what they're thinking.
> Mildred: Mm.
> Frieda: That's quite funny! And often we'll buy the same things or...say exactly the same thing but I'm sure that's because we're living together as well. It's not telepathy.
> Mildred: We already did it once this evening when we said something at exactly the same time, exactly the same thing.
> Frieda: We always do that and look at each other and laugh!
> Mildred: That's the other thing, that sometimes we laugh and giggle uncontrollably together, I mean not that often, but sometimes when we do, we are just pathetic and everyone, that irritates everyone else.

Emotions and talk, in addition to contact patterns, are the other processes through which sister relationships are constructed and maintained. Emotions include the range of feelings sisters experience about each other, their relationship and their ties and lives with significant others[2] - both kin and non-kin. 'Talk' refers to the discussions that take place between the women in the interview and in their lives, and between the women and the researcher. There are variations in the different styles of talk - bickering, teasing, having a giggle, gossiping, confiding, asking and giving advice and listening. For example, Mildred and Frieda said: 'we talk about everything'.

> Mildred: I mean sometimes, when we've got time we do have, sort of mega conversations about...maybe when we're going somewhere in the car together or something we do...do then pretty heavy conversations... [...]
> Frieda: just having a good chin wag or whatever.

Talk and silence along with contact and emotions constitute the 'practices' that make up these relationships (Morgan 1996:188-9).

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2 This term is borrowed from Armistead Maupin's novel, *Significant Others* (1993).

The case study of Zoe (17) and Sofia's (16) relationship examines the contact patterns, emotions and talk between them in detail. Zoe uses the expression 'best friend' to describe their bond:

> Zoe: [...] it's like um, you have best friends, yeah, but...you know that you've got that secret from your best friend as well, that you can only tell your sister...so it's like, it's like a second best friend where you, so, I don't know, she is
> MM: So
> Zoe: She is like one of my best friends

They live together, sharing a bedroom with their younger sister *Gita* (9), and have closely entwined social networks. They recount the pleasures of a night out together with friends:

> Sofia: We went to a party last night and er
> Zoe: It was a good party
> Sofia: it was a wicked party [laughs]
> MM: [laughs]
> Sofia: It was one good party and like the boy whose party it was, it was his twenty-first, [...] so like this party
> Zoe: And I said to her, don't worry
> Sofia: we're going to take you to a good party tonight
> Zoe: we have to let you enjoy your life, you know, have one bit of enjoyment, it's like, she went, she was like, I never danced and I danced and I'm like, I never danced, and I danced
> Sofia: me, it was like non-stop dancing for half, like we went there about 7. We got there 7, we left at 11
> Zoe: no not eleven, twelvish, the party it was like non-stop music and dancing for all that time, and so [...] [laughs] So, but, you know. We had a really good time, we didn't get off the dance floor for all of it and the music, it was hot, it was really hot [laughs]!
> Sofia: wicked music!
> Zoe: So we had a really good time and she was like: Oh, I don't want to go home yet, I don't want to go home! [laughs]

As well as socialising together, they spend a lot of time talking and analysing their lives. The role of talk in promoting intimacy has been highlighted (Hey 1997). Sofia explains:

> Sofia: so it's like not everything I tell my friends, most things, yeah really most things I do, but everything I do tell her, I have to, I can't keep it in [laughs]. [...] Well uh, like I always need somebody to talk to, coming back from school everything, I always need somebody to talk to, you have to tell somebody what is going on, what has just happened to you or something like that and like, and she's like the nearest person, the easiest person to say anything to...

This 'telling' and 'girlfriend knowledge' (Hey 1997:88) are considered vital ingredients of *best friendship*. However, while there has been a lot of interest in this aspect of talk, less attention has been paid to its role and, I would add, to that of silence, in 'constructing divisions' (Hey 1997:138). Zoe reflects on how silence coexists with talk in their relationship, and how silence represents another facet of their knowledge of each other:

> Zoe: it's like, I know what she's going to say before she's even said it, she's thinking it and I'll just look at her and I'll say, don't even bother, don't even try saying that [laughs] 'cos it's that, we know each other that well. [...]
> Sofia: you don't have to explain to your sister what's going on
> Zoe: people think that, oh twins have a lot of, kind of, it's like they've got that telepathy but...it's with every brother and sister, it depends how close you are, like. Some brothers and sisters they don't even like talk to each other, it's like, there's nothing there but then there's some brothers and sisters that are so close that...before they even, before they've done it you know what they gonna do, you know, you know what they're thinking at the time. And like some people are like na na na my sister wouldn't do that and I'll be like, yes my sister would do that [laughs] 'cos you know what, I don't know, it's like...it's, it's unexplainable the way...you know, we know what we're gonna do, you know. I know what she's gonna do before she's done it, she knows what I'm gonna do before I've done it.

When Zoe talks about knowing what Sofia is going to do, she is displaying her intimate knowledge of her. A negative aspect of her own experience of missing lessons at school rouses strong emotions in her and influences her protective attitude towards Sofia. These emotions are linked to education. In spite of their closeness, the difference between them lies in the distinct educational paths that they are pursuing. Sofia is studying A-levels and entering the academic route while Zoe the eldest at 17 is doing business studies. Zoe describes Sofia as the 'brainy' one. They weigh up the merits for Sofia of attending different types of institutions - Sixth Form College or Further Education College - for studying A-levels:

> Sofia: like I know myself if I get into a doss mode then that means doss doss doss and I can't concentrate on my work then. And like the sixth form has got teachers and they control you, they like, they make you do the work and stuff. Whereas in colleges, it's not so strict, so like if I...no, she was even saying it to me as well. If I go sixth form I'll work and as well as have a good time whereas if I go um
> Sofia & Zoe: college, it's all good time
> Sofia: it's all good time

They discuss the minutiae of their daily lives together, from clothes to decisions regarding their educational careers:

> Zoe: But I dunno, I tell my sister everything that happens in college, I tell her, I just like, tell her and come home and say, oh this this happened and she'll like... Well, like, we'll tell each other something, we'll tell each other what has happened and like, that other person will give their reaction to it, like.... This, you shouldn't be doing this, you should be doing that, this and the other and you like...it's like a, it's like, you've got your own opinion but you want a second person's opinion on everything you do. It is, that's what everybody thinks. God, am I doing the right thing? It's like, say you're going out somewhere, no, no, not this dress, the other dress, no not this dress. She's like a second voice, second opinion saying, yeah, you look better in that one. Because you can't decide on what you want, you need somebody to push you to make a choice, yeah, at the end of the day, it's your choice but...you need that one extra person and my sister's the best thing there [laughs].

Zoe's experience of 'dossing' and truanting enables her to position herself as older and wiser:

> Zoe: I was angry I was like, god damn you! I've done it, I've got ^, I've messed up badly, I don't want you messing up as well and I was like, no I don't ever want to see you do it, ever again! [...] If I ever hear of you bunking again, believe me you ain't going to hear the last of it!

Zoe's positioning as the older protective sister dates back to their early years at nursery together:

> Zoe: I remember when we started nursery this little boy used to pick on her all the time, you had to put that big sister act on and say [loudly] you can't touch my little sister!

Zoe's own experience gives rise to anger when Sofia 'bunks' off school, an emotion connected to the fierce loyalty and affection that she feels towards her:

> Zoe: it's like some people do it with their mums, they'll phone them up and say this happened mum today and that happened, 'cos when they're in the depressive mood you just need that one person that's going to say, everything's going to be alright. For me, it's my sister, so even if we're living a thousand miles apart I could phone her up and say this and the other and she'll probably say, don't worry about it, everything will be fine, so, you know

Zoe is positioned by her parents and herself as the responsible and protective 'big sister'; she enjoys this responsibility. Sofia acquiesces to her big sister's advice regarding her choice of A-level subjects: 'If she doesn't approve I can change it, if I don't tell her there's no chance of me changing it'. There is an element of shifting positions in their relationship: Zoe gets advice from Sofia and Sofia went through puberty and matured physically earlier than Zoe - 'God man, you've got bigger tits than me!'

One aspect of their lives which they discuss with relish and have a shared view on is heterosexual desire, boyfriends, sex and marriage. While sex for them is taboo before marriage, they fantasize about 'studs' and enjoy the 'living on the edge' which their curtailed freedom provides. They have an understanding with their parents that they will only get married once they have completed their education. Between them they consider their parents' edict about no sex before marriage:

> Zoe: yeah, in a way yeah, when it comes to my parents, you've got to think like that, yeah. But I dunno, sometimes you have that weird 'once upon a time' thought, yeah what would it be like [laughs]!
> Sofia: No, but then you say, people are saying, oh the world's going to end so and so,
> Sofia & Zoe: don't want to die a virgin!!! [laugh]
> Sofia: and like that's it, no way, no way.

> Zoe: There's like different time, different thought, it's quite funny, like one day, I'm saying this that and the other and that does it! We're going out tomorrow, come on, we're going to come back non-virgins [laughs] and things like that, we're just like, really laugh about things like that. But you know, most of the time, yeah, we agree with our parents, yeah, we're brought up, we're just brought up in that kind of way.

Zoe emphasises the importance of talk in their friendship and traces the rapprochement between them to the time of *Gita*'s birth when she was 8 and Sofia, 7:

> Zoe: and like it's better than talking to the brick wall, I talk back [laughs]. No, but since we've been little because like um...when my younger sister came, everything went...it was like, we got closer then when my younger sister came because well, you know, when she was small my parents paid more attention to her and my sister was born quite late, she's like 8 years younger than me, my younger sister, and um because they then started paying more attention to her, then me and her had to get like, a bit more stronger and like...sometimes, we'd get into trouble to get a bit of attention but other than that, it's like um..we get closer when there's that, when your parents are thinking, yep this is the little one now [laughs] that's it, and then you think, oh god, well, it's me and you now [laughs]!

Talk depends on contact. In this last excerpt from Zoe and Sofia's narrative where they look ahead, they draw links between contact, emotions and change in their relationship over time:

> Sofia: I want to know everything that happens. You think like when you get married everything's going to change...you know, you want it to stay the same but you know everything's going to change. The only way you can keep it the same is like
> Zoe: if you keep in contact
> Sofia: if you keep in contact. [...]
> Zoe: yeah, it is different when you get different ages and different stages like we're thinking closeness now at this stage and some people that are in their late twenties are thinking god if I ever see my sister again I'll kill her [laughs] things like that

In the next section, *best friendship* is contrasted with *close companionship* where contact, emotions and talk take slightly different forms.

2. Close companionship: 'we enjoy each other's company'

Unlike *best friendship*, *close companionship* is defined as a slightly less intense bond where sisters do still play a pivotal role in women's social networks but are not the primary confidante. Ties of *close companionship* are marked by less confiding than *best friendship* and by more affinity, talk and contact than *distant companionship*. Table 9 presents patterns of contact according to its varying forms and frequency for the 13 participants who had close companionate ties with their sisters.

The type of contact in *close companionship* ties varies between those sisters who live in the same city, are part of each other's social networks and socialise together, Eliza and her sisters, for example, and those who live in different areas of the country and see each other more on special occasions - like Anne and Flora. 'High days and holidays' like Christmas, Easter and birthdays are often the focus for family gatherings. Other family events when sisters and siblings will travel and be together include weddings and funerals. One middle-class woman contrasted kinship and friendship ties in terms of the whole 'infrastructure' or 'machinery' that existed in her family ensuring regular contact, in contrast with her ties with her friends where the encounters needed to be set up.

Table 9: Close companionship contact patterns

Geographical proximity	Type of contact	Frequency
Sisters who live together		
Hilda and Adrienne	Horse riding, playing, shopping	Daily contact
Eve, Celia, Amy and Isabel	Family meals, letters to Eve, joking, mothering Isabel	Daily contact
Sisters who live in the same city		
Eliza, Alice and Rosemary	Family events, socialising, childcare, sport, shopping, girls' night out, phonecalls	Weekly
Madonna and Jeanne[3]	Outings with Jeanne's partner, shopping	Monthly
Sisters who live in different cities		
Anne and Flora	Family events, phonecalls, holidays	Monthly
Lauren, *Danielle, Shirley* and *Marie*	Family events, phonecalls, childcare, DIY	Every 2-3 months
Leonie and Jeanne	Occasional visits, phonecalls	Every few months

This 'infrastructure' has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, a significant and positive aspect of the sister bond for some is the notion of sisters 'being there' for each other which Madonna (30) described in the following way:

> MM: What does being there look like?
> Madonna: It's like a big squidgy cushion [laughter]

Other advantages of *close companionship* - informality, support, common background and traits, and shared references - are mentioned by teenagers Celia (16) and her sisters Eve (18) and Amy (13):

> Celia: [...] you don't have to keep up a front because they know you much better than your friends do
> Eve: [...] with your family, you know they won't let you down, you know they care.
> Celia: [...] you've got, you know, a lot more in common in that you've had the same upbringing [laughs] [...]

3 Jeanne, whose name appears twice in this table, has been included in the total number of 13 *close companionships* while her sisters, Madonna and Leonie, whose names appear here only once, have not. They have been counted in the total number of 10 *distant companionships* (see Table 10), where their names appear twice.

Eve: Some things apply, mannerisms and things
Celia: Exactly, you've experienced the same things so there's no kind of lack of communication
Eve: Yeah.
Celia: So you don't have these double entendres that you get the wrong end of the stick of [laughs] because you've actually, you know
MM: Mm.
Celia: You're a part of them. You laughing at me?
Amy: [laughs] I don't know what I'm...
Celia: You're laughing at me [laughs] I know that!...
Amy: [laughs] [...]
Eve: So also we've all had a very sort of family based upbringing so we're, I'd say all of us were pretty close to our maternal grandparents, well, well our maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather, and um, so we can sort of say, ah isn't granny a pain!
Celia: [laughs]

For teenage sisters like Adrienne (12) and Hilda (9) who live together, this infrastructure can lead to the presence of an almost constant and available companion to play with. As Adrienne said:

> Adrienne: If I, if I suddenly...want to be babyish again, I just be, I go and play with Hilda, you know. If I'm...[...] if I'm in a mood, if I want to play offices or something... [...] You know, I mean, I'd never play offices with my friend, I mean, you know, you don't admit to your friends that you, you want to play offices. I'll go and play with Hilda...

For Hilda and Adrienne, living together also leads to tensions, to do with safeguarding their autonomy and managing their sister's moodiness. These two have frequent contact and know each other's lives intimately. They would not describe themselves as best friends for each has her own best friend at school: however, *best friendship* elements of their tie were tangible in the interview (see Chapter III, section 4). One of the issues which they consider is the difference between having a sister and having a friend. They contrast the element of choice in friendship with the feeling of being 'joined at the hip' in sister relationships - a disadvantage. Hilda and Adrienne said:

Adrienne: A sister, a sister you have to live with all the time. A friend you can just see when you want.
Hilda: You tend to find out their bad habits and stuff.
Adrienne: Yeah.
Hilda: An' I mean with a friend you don't kind of have those awful kind of fights with each other and stuff. And um...
Adrienne: With a friend you have to be more tactful to...
Hilda: Yeah.

> Adrienne: ...because you can't say 'oh you're just such a little prat' you know and go away. If you do that to your friend, you'd say, 'could you please', you know.
> Hilda: 'Cos I mean like, you know, with your friends, you wouldn't be friends anymore, so you get another one. But I mean, a sister, you're stuck with.
> Adrienne: You'll always have a sister whatever you say to her.
> Hilda: [laughs] I mean, I mean if you say anything, she can't suddenly kind of go out and say, 'Well, I'm not your sister anymore' or something [laughs], so you'd really, you could do anything.

Another disadvantage of the family 'machinery' is that sisters may end up spending more time together than they desire. One woman, remembering her childhood, recalled bitter-sweet emotions of admiration and wariness of her older sister who bewitched her with her elaborate fantasies and stories and also expected her to obey instructions and carry out tasks for her. She explained: 'I do remember her once telling me to go and get a broom to clean out some, you know...I don't think it was actually her room but it was something close to it...and suddenly, saying to myself...no, I don't have to do this.'

Among adult women, the issue of whether or not they are in a sexual relationship can have a significant influence on the type of *close companionship* they enjoy. Several attached women with children felt ambivalent about the single status of their sisters: one felt concerned that she rarely saw her sister on her own without her partner. Another woman aimed to 'steer clear' of the topic of their distinct marital statuses and avoided 'yacking away about the whole kind of mix of, of, of things that happen here' out of 'protectiveness' for her sister. This silence constituted an important aspect of their tie, a way of avoiding broaching sensitive differences between them. A single woman who wanted a partner and children felt envious and wary of her sister's nuclear set-up, saw her regularly and distanced herself from her emotionally: for example, she did not tell her that she had joined a social club in order to meet people.

The following case study reveals how *close companionship* can include regular contact patterns with less emotional intimacy than *best friendship* as positive aspects of this tie. Lauren (37) maintains ties of *close companionship* with her three sisters, *Danielle* (36), *Shirley* (34) and *Marie* (30), in spite of geographical distance and changes in social class positions between them. Lauren describes their intimacy as less than that of *best friendship*:

> Lauren: they know...well, no, they don't know what's going on, that's not true...they know what you're doing on one level but they wouldn't know intimate details about relationships I have down here. You know, that sort of thing, they'd only know certain things, much more on the surface type thing.

Lauren, the eldest, diverged from the traditional path in her family: she is the only one among her four sisters and brother to have obtained A-levels, entered higher education and landed a job without 'struggling'. She is also the only one among them who moved away from the town in Wales where her whole family still lives.

> Lauren: I think it's the rest that makes the bigger difference.
> MM: Like?
> Lauren: Going to college and moving away from home without moving in with a partner and spent more time on [my] own, whereas my sisters lived at home, one didn't but...may as well have done. [...] I think it's to do with having that different experience and having different expectations really. It's more to do with that, that's why they don't see me as often because I didn't get married...you know, I'd just be flitting around doing whatever I wanted to.

Another difference that marks her out from her siblings is her marital status. Although like them she, too, is a parent, they are all married and she remains single: one area that she does not discuss is her love life. Lauren herself commented on this unusual situation where difference is incorporated, especially the way that it has not affected her contact with her family or led to distancing between them. In this extract she reflects on the way that her difference has been easier for them to accept now that she is a mother while her silence about her sexual relationships remains a puzzle for her siblings:

> Lauren: They just think, well, she's different. And they just accept it and that's that. They find it a bit normal me having a child than...they've got something to latch onto a bit more. And as I say, it wasn't that we didn't get on...we just...I don't think they resented it but I think it just....it's probably more of an interest, isn't it, that they didn't know about as well. I'm probably more like them than they realise [laughs]. It's just that they can't see it.

Lauren has more 'common ground' as she says with her friends than with her siblings:

> Lauren: I think it's also to do with..they've had more similar experiences to you, they left home to go to college, and got work and then they've settled somewhere away from home I think, whereas my sisters didn't do that. They left school, got a job near home, got married...moved in with...the person they got married to and had kids.

Despite the differences between them, Lauren is very involved with her siblings' lives and maintains regular contact with her family travelling to see them and organising visits when her son Ryan (age 3) stays with her relatives while she works.

> Lauren: They are very important but it's not on a day to day basis. And not important in your daily lives like other people but they are...they are a support network but it's a different sort of support. Things like I mean, *Danielle*, has come down here and looked after Ryan. She'll come down, when she's not working and looks after him for three or four days when I've been at work...he goes up and stays with her.
> MM: By himself?
> Lauren: Yes. Go up for 2 weeks, a week.
> MM: Without you?
> Lauren: Yes.
> MM: So he obviously knows them.
> Lauren: Oh, he knows them really well. He's...yes...he stays at my mum's...

Lauren's siblings are a vital part of her social network especially regarding her rearing her son as a single parent. Also as the eldest, Lauren looked after her younger siblings while her parents worked. She says that she was different even when she still lived at home. She and Danielle passed the 11+ and attended a girls' school, yet only she carried on with her education. It was her mother who encouraged her to study in a different part of the country rather than Lauren who wanted to leave the area. Lauren's commitment to her relationships with her sisters is clear: they do not make her life difficult in any way, they enhance it, nor are they a source of upheaval like they can be for other women:

> Lauren: I think they're important relationships. It's just...from looking for things and how they've changed and they've changed because I think of fairly normal reasons nothing...there's not been a major trauma that's caused any changes and the relationships themselves haven't caused major traumas.

When she reflects further on the question of change in her relationships with her sisters over the years, she highlights the commonalities between them:

> Lauren: I don't think they have changed a lot, I think...they reached a point and they've stayed, we are more equal than we were in that they...I can talk to *Marie* now about things I wouldn't have talked to...when I was there because we're all...we've all got...a house to run and children to look after and a job to do and that sort of thing so your age is sort of...you come closer in age, in a way, as you get older...the age difference was much bigger when I was there...so that has changed but the actual relationship, I don't think probably, has changed a lot.

Lauren's companionate ties with her sisters are important to her though not on a day to day basis. They have a familiar, round the corner sort of relationship in spite of the geographical distance. They do not know intimate details about her, unlike her best friend Sylvia, for Lauren only tells them what she wants them to know.

> Lauren: Sylvia would know most things about say, relationships with men that I have or whatever, whereas they wouldn't...they would see it much more on a public level than... I wouldn't sit down and discuss things with ...and it's partly because there's no point to a large extent because they're not around

Here Lauren herself distinguishes between the private and the public within sister relationships. Furthermore, she presents selected details of her life to her siblings, comparable to what occurs in both the interview and the writing up of the data when the participant and the researcher select material. Lauren says: 'If they only see you every three months, they only see what's presented at that point.' This idea of selection of material in the research process mirrors this same process in some women's lives in their personal ties.

3. Distant companionship: 'we weren't a sort of buddy team'

Compared to *best friendship* and *close companionship*, *distant companionship* is marked by lower levels of contact among sisters who live together or apart. Table 10 presents a summary of the 10 women whose ties with their sister are of *distant companionship*.

Table 10: Distant companionship contact patterns

Geographical proximity	Type of contact	Frequency
Sisters who live together		
Judith and Nicole	Cinema outings, window-shopping	Daily
Sisters who live in different cities		
Beth and Louise	Family events, holidays, occasional visits, phonecalls	Every few months
Jeanne and Roxanne[4]	Family events	Twice a year
Madonna and Roxanne	Family events, phonecalls, occasional visits	Every two months
Leonie and Madonna	Family events, phonecalls	Monthly
Leonie and Roxanne	Family events, phonecalls	Monthly
Rowena and *Grace*	Occasional visits, phone calls	Every few months
Carmen and *Rita*	Family events, phonecalls, no physical contact	Every few months
Clare and *Stella*	Family events, no physical contact	Every two months

4 In this table, Roxanne, Madonna and Leonie, whose names appear twice, have been included in the total number of 10 *distant companionships* while their sister Jeanne, whose name appears once, has not. She was counted as part of the total number of 13 *close companionships* (see Table 9).

Distant companionship is the tie with the least contact, affinity, talk and emotional 'in-depthness' to use Leonie's word, or rapport between sisters. In some cases, the age gap is an important factor that contributes to distance between sisters. Judith (16) and Nicole (10), Beth (27) and Louise (22), and Carmen (47) who is 14 years older than her sister *Rita*, all mentioned the large age gap as a significant factor. For Rowena (37) and *Grace* (34) competition between them as teenagers and geographical distance in their adult lives have led to irregular contact. Similarly, Clare (50) and *Stella* (52) hardly see each other partly because, in Clare's words, they are not close, partly they never were. Moreover, the silence around Clare's disability in the family contributed to her distancing herself from her sister and mother. For Roxanne (37) and Jeanne (45), an unresolved rift between them when they were in their twenties and the subsequent breakdown of communication has led to their estrangement.

Other factors leading to negative distancing raised by several women, in contrast with the positive distancing in Lauren's ties of *close companionship* include lack of reciprocity, sisters not providing support during moments of trauma or transitions - for example, medical operations, endings and beginnings of sexual relationships. One woman gave a vivid illustration of her one-way relationship with her sister: '....by telling me her problem, we got close, we got close. But as close as, it was more or less a one-sided relationship. She talked to me and I gave advice. But it wasn't a closeness that I tell her my problems, she tell me her problems.' Another woman gave this example of how she felt let down after a difficult surgical intervention. She said: 'the whole thing was a devastating experience. And my sister just wasn't there at all for me, my sister [...], she was out of the country at the time and when she got back she had heard what had happened, I mean she'd heard that I was [operated on] and then she'd heard through her [children] that I'd had an [operation] and she didn't ring or anything to see how I was and I was just utterly devastated by that when I knew that she'd been in touch with my brother...'.

The case study of Rowena's relationship with her sister *Grace* illuminates facets of the *distant companionship* tie. Rowena (37) and *Grace* (34) are in touch and maintain contact, yet are not very involved in each other's lives. *Grace* has worked in Alaska for the last decade and Rowena in England: their contact is infrequent. The distance between them is geographical and emotional:

> Rowena: I don't actually rely upon her on a day to day basis. I mean, when you're talking about, you know...friendships, with women, friendships, you know, when I have problems in my life, I don't go and ring her up to talk about them. [...] It isn't just the distance. It's something more...

Rowena traces the origins of her feelings to girlhood when she felt envious of *Grace*:

> Rowena: As a family I don't think we were ever particularly closely knit. I didn't, I think I saw my sister as a competitor rather than as a friend. [...] I look at this picture and I see myself at five as rather...tense, with a forced smile and rather skinny with a scab on my nose and there's my little sister er...looking pretty with curly hair and a round face and a nice smile.

Her envy turned into jealousy and she talked about having always felt jealous of *Grace*, regarding looks, boyfriends, and her 'self-sufficiency'. At the end of the interview Rowena searched for a recent photograph of *Grace* that she wanted to show me which she could not find: instead she brought out a family album with shots of them as teenagers which she proceeded to describe:

> Rowena: there she is, sweet with curly hair, I was always jealous because she had curly hair and I had straight hair as well. [...] I was at home when she was born and it's reported that I drew all over the walls with lipstick or wax crayon or something, so it was a very sort of major jealousy reaction there....

The sisters went to school together but led separate lives outside and inside the home:

> Rowena: We had a long thin bedroom and we used to have it divided by a bookcase, so it was very much a divide as opposed to a muck in together and share. It was very much her part and my part.

Their relationship was one of competitiveness: *Grace* was the cheerful plump pretty one who took after their 'scientific' father. Now, as adults, the pattern has remained similar partly owing to *Grace*'s decision to live abroad. Another difference between them is their marital status: Rowena is married with three children and *Grace* is cohabiting.

Rowena went to visit *Grace* once in Alaska soon after she had relocated there and earlier in the year *Grace* came to the UK on holiday: this most recent visit turned out to be more emotional for Rowena than she expected:

> Rowena: we were just chatting and just as she went, I broke down and said ...I really miss you and it was something I hadn't realised...it sort of came out spontaneously and I had a good old weep and a hug with her and ...yeah, so I thought about it since because it very much surprised me, that reaction because I'd never had...had that much closeness. I rarely ring her, I never write to her, I think I must have written about once in the whole nine years she's been away.

The distance is a key factor in their relationship which has led Rowena to form close ties with other women especially a younger North American cousin, Aysha, who is 31. Over the years, Rowena has formed a close bond with Aysha: they spent a summer together in North America when Rowena was 18 and Aysha stayed with her for several months when she was in her early twenties. Aysha now lives in Europe and Rowena has visited her with her family and Aysha visits Rowena on her way home to North America. During a recent crisis in Rowena's life when she had an operation, she turned to her cousin for support. She did not ring her sister or even tell her about it. Talking about Aysha, she says:

> Rowena: she lived with us but she's very much more...you know, she'll talk about emotions and we've had sort of much longer and deeper conversations than I ever had with my sister. [...] I've adopted her as a sister...

Reflecting on her relationship with *Grace*, Rowena says 'we are not very meshed': she would like more contact with her and suspects that they will when *Grace* has children. Her description of her bond with *Grace* summarises the *distant companionship* tie: 'the last ten years have been ....work, career building, career progression, relationship, children,...the lot you know and those are the years I haven't shared with my sister.' The sadness which she feels is palpable in her voice, sadness about not knowing *Grace* very well.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrated the first two strands of the typology, *best friendship* and *companionship* - including *close* and *distant companionship* - through some general descriptions of the facets of each tie and a series of case studies. The focus was on the processes involved in *best friendship* and *companionship* - the strategies that sisters use to maintain and construct their relationships (O'Connor 1992). The case studies of Zoe and Sofia, Lauren and her sisters, and Rowena and *Grace*, illustrate how the different types of ties that exist between them based on contact, talk and emotions are connected to variables of age and geography in particular, and also marital status.

One distinction between *best friendship*, *close* and *distant companionship* is that on the whole, women feel positive about their best friendships, because of or in spite of their 'emotional intensity' and especially because of their 'reflection of a self confirmed as 'normal' since the face that smiles back is our friend/ourself' (Hey 1997: 88, 136). Hey (1997:136) suggests that 'what is invested in friendship practices is the attempt to inscribe the subject into a position which suppresses or directs desire and difference'. Regarding *close* and *distant companionship*, women's feelings can be more ambivalent: Lauren feels satisfied with her ties of *close companionship* with her sisters, Jeanne would like more

contact with Madonna, and Alice would prefer greater intimacy with her sisters; Rowena feels sad about her *distant companionship* with *Grace*, whereas Carmen and Clare have accepted the distance between them and their sisters.

These descriptive strands of the typology offer partial interpretations of women's sister relationships: difficulties remain regarding decisions of how to write up 'life-stories' (Purvis 1987). These definitions of the different types of tie are not fixed because these relationships change over time: they were applied to the bonds at the time of the interview in order to document the culture of sisters' lives at a particular stage. Changes over time and the turning-points that they coincide with are the focus of the next chapter (VI). The two analytic strands of the typology - the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses - are examined in Chapter VII.

Chapter VI

Turning-Points and Changing Relationships

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Turning-Points and Changing Relationships

Introduction

This chapter focuses on transitions and moments of change in sister relationships in the current study. Sisters' changing relationships, as documented here, encompass both chronological change and passing life events. These transitions and moments of change are also marked by the different phases and types of tie - *companionship/best friendship* - that a single relationship can go through. The analysis centres on two case studies: the first concerns Leila and *Annar*'s tie based on an individual interview with Leila alone; Leila planned to tell Annar that she was taking part in the study after the interview. The second case study concerns Madonna and Roxanne's tie, based on separate interviews with each of them. These case studies were selected for their illustration of the move in opposite directions from *best friendship* to *companionship* and vice versa from the teenage years to womanhood. The evolution of these relationships charts the passage from growing up in one household to leaving home, growing up and apart, commencing and leaving sexual relationships, moving and settling in a new location.

This chapter documents these transitions in sister ties through changing and contradictory positionings and subjectivities. It traces the processes through which women as sisters imagine other positionings through entering or leaving one discourse rather than another and the pleasures and pains that ensue. First, it considers the trajectory of Leila and *Annar*'s relationship, marked in their teenage years and their twenties by *distant companionship* and the *positioned* discourse, distance and feelings of resentment, to one of *best friendship* and *shifting positions* in their current adult lives. Secondly, Madonna and Roxanne's relationship is presented as a contrast. They moved from a tie of *best friendship* and moments of flirtation with the *shifting positions* discourse in their teens and twenties to *distant companionship* and the *positioned* discourse in their thirties. An important aspect in both relationships was the impact of the women's sexual relationships which at various times brought them together and created distance between them.

Combinations of the different strands of the typology within a single relationship, in the present and over time, are clearly visible in these case studies and in the relationships examined in other chapters. However, the strands are emphasised in detail in specific chapters. In this chapter the focus is on turning-points and the transition between *best*

friendship and *companionship* through the case studies although references to the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses[1] are made when relevant; these two discourses in turn are elaborated further in the next chapter.

1. Prodigal daughter and beauty queen: Leila and Annar

The positive development for Leila (age 40) and *Annar* (age 38), of their relationship from *distant companionship* to *best friendship* mirrors in some ways the evolution of Suzanne and *Collette*'s tie where an initial period marked by distance, conflict and estrangement was followed by *best friendship* (see Chapter VII). More rivals than friends when they were growing up, Leila and *Annar*'s relationship changed and became closer or 'sisterly' as Leila puts it, when they were in their thirties, following the death of their father.

Two main turning-points occurred in their thirties: a family rift with their brothers and, shortly afterwards, the death of their father. These two external life events did not have to do with them directly, in contrast with other moments more internal to their relationship. These other events, more integral to the relationship, included their departure from home for boarding school as teenagers; their divergent educational careers; and the vicissitudes of their sexual relationships. The focus is on these external and internal experiences in the context of the evolution of their bond from *distant companionship* to *best friendship*, and from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse.

Growing up

As teenagers, Leila and *Annar* were opposites: they fought constantly about clothes and sharing bedrooms and had a relationship of *distant companionship* which lasted into their twenties. They were more enemies than companions as girls, until they went to boarding school in their teens when they rallied together in an alien environment. Leila says:

> Leila: We were very very different, she was a tomboy and I was very studious and she had a string of boyfriends and I was always, I mean I wanted to do my homework. [...] She's told me over the years that that's been her problem, she suddenly started really resenting me mainly because um she didn't get into university and whatever and er... [...] she's very pretty and...there was no way that she wouldn't be sought after or fought after. For marriage and whatever, and in a way I resented that too. I had to play the part of the ugly sister almost, you know, so that really caused a rift and I didn't know all these years that she had the resentment because she saw me as the intelligent sister and I saw her as the pretty, the beautiful sister so it caused a rift in our relationship for many years.

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1 For definitions of the two discourses, see Chapter IV, section 5.

This period of distance continued into their twenties before the new-found closeness which emerged in their thirties:

> Leila: we were so distant that while I was at university, I was three months, she would never call me once or I would never call her once [...] there are a lot of, you know, the complexities, the competition at that age and I was jealous of her and she was jealous of me

During their teens, growing up in the Middle East and at boarding school in Britain, Leila was located as the older responsible sister in the *positioned* discourse. It was Leila's decision to enter boarding school at fifteen and Annar followed her there. Reflecting on this decision she says: 'I am a strong person anyway, I know what I want at the end of the day'. Her strong sense of her own subjectivity was present from an early age. Soon after arriving, they were both stunned:

> Leila: It was a shock, absolute shock to the system. I couldn't believe it - *Annar* going to bed at 7.30, you know all my protective nature... protectiveness towards her, came out 'cos I realised that she'd made a dreadful mistake.

She describes the *positioned* discourse and role that she adopted in her teens:

> Leila: we were sent away from [home] to come to England. Then I took on a different role, almost as the eldest sister and protective over her and that kind of role, um she accepted because she needed for about four or five years. [...] it was a role I had to play from a very young age, you know it wasn't just myself I had to look after. I had to look after my sister. And in a boarding school, you know to have an elder sister was a great advantage [laughs]. 'Cos you know, I'd have to go and fight her fights for her, you know, if two friends suddenly get hold of her, classmates and...make sure that they weren't troubling her. There wasn't anybody for me, do you know what I'm saying, I had that responsibility while I didn't *have* that.

They followed different educational paths starting from an early age and this set them against each other. At 10, Leila passed the exam to enter the secondary school system while *Annar* failed and went to private school, a sort of 'dumping ground'. Leila explains:

> Leila: I passed that with flying colours while my sister failed, so already there was a stigma attached to her from a very young age... [...] because I passed, I was in a state school, I had a very good education.

Educational careers

In Britain, Leila did A-levels and went to university, *Annar* did O-levels and trained as a nurse. *Annar* as an adult and mother of two now regrets not going to university. After they left school there was a period of distance between them: Leila and *Annar* ended up in different parts of the country while Leila was a student. *Annar* started work after her training and in her late teens met a man whom she wanted to marry. This led to conflict between *Annar* and her parents who opposed her choice. Yet this episode brought the sisters closer as Leila backed and supported her: 'my protective nature came out and I was really for her' Leila says. *Annar* later married her 'second suitor'. And when *Annar* and her husband's marriage went through a difficult patch, Leila got involved and supported her. Throughout she respected *Annar*'s privacy and never pried:

> Leila: I didn't feel I should force it on her. I mean, I've never, we've had a relationship where neither of us have forced anything on each other. Some sisters, you know, expect it as their right to know.

Both sisters eventually became emotionally involved in each other's sexual relationships with positive outcomes for each of them.

Nevertheless, in their twenties, their different educational paths led to feelings of resentment for both of them. *Annar* felt resentful towards Leila for missing out on university:

> Leila: she's told me over the years that, that's been her problem, she suddenly started really resenting me mainly because um she didn't get into university and whatever and er...and then my father, you know, my parents were very proud of me while they weren't of her and...she always wished that she had done something, so in a way she said she always...she was in awe of me.

These feelings of resentment which each of them had and kept to themselves led to distance between them which they bridged only recently. At the same time, Leila has fierce emotions for *Annar*: 'I love her more than any of my siblings...er...I love her most' she says.

Their relationship was transformed by life events into a strong bond of *best friendship*. A defining element of their *best friendship* is what Leila calls 'being there':

> Leila: we've both been supportive, it's like... I don't know, instinct, or it's like a reflex action when your sister is in...in any trouble, you forget all your differences and you go there and you...you're 100% there for them...well I am for my sister and I'm sure she is...well she has been for me. [...] with a sister you feel that unconditional love the way you do with a parent...I mean I have very very close friends and I could depend on them but I don't know,

> I think at the end of the day er...with my sister it would be different, I mean if I was in a real crisis it's my sister I would turn to.

Leila's language of 'instinct' and 'reflex action' conveys gut reactions to emotional upheaval in the relationship. Her understanding of her relationship with *Annar* is based on 'unconditional love' which in a sense allows her to overlook or embrace 'differences' between them. 'Being there' is connected to the idea of reciprocity and dependability.

Lovers

One area in which both sisters have supported each other is in their sexual relationships against parental opposition. Like *Annar*'s experience of parental disapproval, Leila similarly endured her parents' 'aghast' reaction at one of her liaisons. *Annar*'s endorsement of Leila's choice reflects another instance of the sisters' move from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse: Their support has been reciprocal - dependability and reliance exist on both sides:

> Leila: She was very supportive, she's always been very supportive over my relationship[s]. So I suppose that goes both ways. And I think obviously needless, she's had er problems in her marriage and I've been supportive...

Leila describes *Annar*'s support in helping her decide to end a sexual relationship; moreover, *Annar* agreed to manage part of the break-up for her: 'she cared so much, that she went through the nitty-gritty for me, something that I couldn't handle, she did it for me.'

For Leila, her sister is her best friend in terms of her first port of call in difficult situations, either emotional or practical - lending money for example: 'there's a trust which is both ways.' Leila expands:

> Leila: I would only ring her if it was absolutely important and likewise. If she ever rang me I'd know it was absolutely important and I would help. The trust there is 100%. As I said, I mean, I think we're the closest, she's...she's the closest human being to me.

Leila is aware of the importance and effect of their different marital statuses and its influence on her feelings for *Annar* and their tie:

> Leila: because I'm older, I first play the protective role over my sister. And then I'm not married and I don't have children so to me, my sister's kids and my sister are very important as family. She's my only family apart from my brothers, but I'm not close to them. Not in the same way.

Transitions: a family rift and bereavement

What is striking about Leila's narrative is the dual change from *distant companionship* to *best friendship* and from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse. Similar elements are apparent in Suzanne's relationship with *Collette* described in Chapter VII. The reciprocity between them in their thirties is in marked contrast with the antagonism of their teen years and twenties. Leaving behind their positions of 'big' and 'little' sister, Leila and *Annar* moved into *best friendship* where each provides support for the other. How did this transformation occur?

Leila charts the changes that her relationship with *Annar* went through:

> Leila: when the competition finally, I mean that, that was in our teens and our early twenties and then er...and then we weren't really close and as I said, in my situation I was not close completely and then she had a really bad um ten years and her marriage went through a very bad trauma for many years. You know, where she didn't have time to have any relationship with me so we were kind of apart until she worked her marriage out

Only in their thirties did they became closer. Two life events brought them closer: the first was a family rift, and the second, their father's death. The rapprochement between the sisters started during the family rift shortly before their father's death. The rift occurred when three of their brothers sided against their father and other brother in the family business, a form of internal take-over bid: 'there is a Judas in our family', Leila says. And she continues:

> Leila: we were kind of forced to get together, my sister, me and my father and mother and one brother, and we became very close because then we had to give a lot of support to my dad, so we had to become close, so that probably was the shifting point in our relationship.

This 'shifting point' in Leila and *Annar*'s relationship came with the family rift when both sisters sided with parents and one brother against their three other brothers who took over the family manufacturing business. This split in family allegiances and loyalties contributed to the end of the phase of distance between the sisters which lasted from Leila's late teens to when she was 24.

An important element in the rapprochement between the sisters during the family rift was the role of talk:

> Leila: we were very distant between I would say...18 to 23...24...extremely distant...and then this rift happened between our family and we were kind of

> forced to pull together again and then er... And then *Annar* was coming home a lot to help my parents and over this...emotional break-up and then after that, I suppose we started getting on again. And then as we matured over [our] thirties we've actually talked about it and said...that, look
> MM: You've talked about your relationship?
> Leila: Mm.
> MM: Which you hadn't done before?
> Leila: No, we'd never done that before. It does help to talk, doesn't it, to get it out into the open...

The sisters' coming together during this family split prepared the way for greater closeness between them in their thirties in the subsequent upheaval in the wake of their father's death. *Annar* was very close to their father and affected by this bereavement. Leila wonders about the impact of her father's death on *Annar* a year later, when she was on the verge of a 'nervous breakdown'. Leila speculates on the possible links between *Annar*'s grief and the difficulties she was having at the time during her marriage: 'maybe the problem is her own because she's missing her dad so much, you know [...] she was going through this terrible loss'.

It was a year after their father's death when the sisters were in their mid-thirties, that Leila stepped into *Annar*'s private life. When her marriage was in trouble Leila took charge of *Annar*'s well-being and whisked her off to a health professional to obtain help: 'Whatever her happiness is, is my happiness' she says, describing her motivation. In this way, she became a more central presence in *Annar*'s emotional life:

> Leila: I mean the day that I just went over and took my sister's life in my hands [...] I think that kind of jolt[ed] her a bit probably to start...getting me back in her life.

On that day, Leila dropped everything, drove to see *Annar*, did not go to work, stayed at the neighbour's, waited until *Annar*'s husband left the house, then went in and took her off to seek support. Leila recognises that she was forceful with *Annar*, that as the older sister it may have been easier for her to, in a sense, relocate herself in the *positioned* discourse in a moment of crisis. Looking back at the past from the present and analysing the relationship from her vantage point, Leila wishes that *Annar* had been more forthright with *her* at specific moments and spoken her mind. She cites two examples: one involving a business deal where one of her brothers took her for a ride; another was when *Annar* could immediately see that Leila's new lover was an unwise choice for her as she was on the rebound. In a sense, Leila wishes that they could have appropriated the *shifting positions* discourse more so that *Annar* could have been her 'big' sister during specific episodes.

Current lives

These turning-points - the family rift and their father's death - were significant in contributing to the gradual transformation of their *distant companionship*, except for their years at boarding-school when they drew closer in an alien environment, to *best friendship.* The period of evolution took place over a decade from Leila's mid-twenties towards the end of her time at university, to her mid-thirties. Now at 40, Leila enjoys weekly contact with *Annar*: *Annar* suggested that Leila move to her neighbourhood and Leila says that 'we have become more of a family'. They mainly see each other with *Annar*'s two children. They help each other professionally as they coincidentally work in the same sector - health. Their *best friendship*, like Hazel and Phoebe's (see Chapter VII), exists in spite of the differences between them - regarding political divergences, for example, Leila says: 'we're like chalk and cheese'. Their *best friendship* is founded on their common experiences or 'shared lives' (Gordon 1994) and their new openness - their ability to talk and reflect on their relationship and give feedback: Leila says 'now I feel I can tell her something, I can tell her something I'm not happy about'.

The sisters have shed earlier emotions of jealousy and resentment and vying over claims to the position in the family of, what Leila terms, 'the prodigal daughter'. Instead, their changing relationship has brought them closer through its transitions. Although Leila said that she had never thought about the relationship 'actively', she certainly produced a reflexive narrative: she also said that she found the discussion in the interview thought-provoking and therapeutic. This is how she summarised the relationship:

> Leila: I mean, maybe this kind of scenario must happen with a lot of people, where they are very close if there's a small age gap, very close. Then there is this teenage gap where, you know, you...the teen age and early twenties when you fall apart and then you come together.

2. Tough cookie and prima donna: Roxanne and Madonna

In contrast with Leila and *Annar*'s tie, in Roxanne and Madonna's relationship the changes occurred in the opposite direction: similar transitions to do with bereavement and sexual relationships, in this case the dissolution of a marriage, transformed their tie from *best friendship* in their teens to *distant companionship* in adulthood. One of the parallels between the two case studies is the role of sexual relationships in sister ties. Whereas in Leila and *Annar*'s relationship, their romantic lives ultimately brought them closer, for Roxanne and Madonna, the end of Roxanne's marriage had a negative ripple effect on their bond.

The combination of Roxanne's 'split' with her husband, Madonna's experience of living with Roxanne and her ex-husband, Madonna's two other sisters' divorces, and the death of their father eroded the stability of four nuclear families and marked the end of an era. Unlike the case study of Leila and *Annar*'s relationship, which is based on Leila's narrative alone, this second case study is grounded in both Roxanne and Madonna's separate accounts. First, I sketch out the context of their family background and its shake-up following their father's death. Next, I examine Roxanne and Madonna's stories of their changing relationship over three decades.

Family background

Roxanne (39) and Madonna (31) live in cities in different areas of the country. Roxanne lives with her daughter Lucille (12) and new partner Trevor; Madonna is single, lived at one time with Roxanne and her ex-husband, and now lives in a shared house. They grew up on a council estate in Southern England and describe their background as working class. Their relationship with their older sister, Jeanne (45), is mentioned in this chapter where relevant and in more detail in the next. Reference to Leonie (48), the eldest in the family, occurs elsewhere (see Chapters III and VII). A significant event in Roxanne and Madonna's lives was their father's death eight years ago. They were closer to their father than their mother, and Madonna, the youngest in a family of seven siblings enjoyed a special relationship with him. As Roxanne remembers:

> Roxanne: You know, Madonna had a very different relationship with dad to the rest of us because she was the youngest and because we'd all paved the way a bit, you know, so you know, Madonna had period pains, dad would make her a hot water bottle whereas if we had period pains, it was - shut up - your father's around [Whispered]. So yeah, the relationships were qualitatively different because dad had more time, obviously

After their mother was widowed, she moved out of the house they grew up in to another estate in the same town.

The sisters' father's death significantly altered their natal family (Parkin 1997) and shifted the responsibility for looking after their mother onto them. Roxanne (and Leonie) is more involved with caring for their mother than Madonna as she lives relatively near her. Their different attitudes towards their mother has brought them closer together and created tension between them reflecting, in Roxanne's view, their distinct brands of feminism. Their experience of higher education and consequent social mobility has contributed to the distance between them and their mother. Gender, class and education have all played their part in their individual and relationship trajectories: these three elements permeate their

different experiences and understandings of both their relationships with their mother and with each other.

Girlhood

As young women, Roxanne and Madonna were best friends throughout their late teens and twenties. They socialised together and knew each other's friends. Roxanne explains:

> Roxanne: Madonna and I got close from when she was about 18 onwards I suppose, and then, out of all my sisters Madonna and I became the closest. [...] with Madonna, Madonna, it was very much like a friendship you know, we'd go to music together, we'd go to the pub together. You know, I'd have her friends and my friends round for meals and we'd all mix together um, so yeah with Madonna it was like a friendship...

Madonna corroborates Roxanne's account of their friendship tie. In addition, she highlights similarities between them which at times created tension:

> Madonna: Roxanne and I have got very kind of similar kind of sort of beliefs and values and things and that's kind of always been a bit of a problem because we have been at kind of, we have been at stages, been very very close. [...] I mean, there was a stage when I actually, I used to live with Roxanne and her, her then husband, so we, we were very close and we still are very close but it's, it's almost been changed just because of the geographical nature of where we live, um.

The changes in their tie which Madonna hints at were the result of two significant life events: bereavement and divorce.

Turning-points: bereavement

Two life events occurred when Madonna was in her twenties: her father's death when she was 23, and a few years later, when she was 28, the break-up of Roxanne's marriage. Both had long-lasting effects on her relationship with Roxanne. Madonna describes the effects of the death of their father in terms of the family structure, emotions and changing patterns of caring between her and her sisters:

> Madonna: it's just the whole business of him not being around anymore and, and our relationship not being as, as strong with our mother for any of us, it kind of, things just sort of fell apart a bit for, for a stage, for a time really. Um
> MM: Things fell apart, what between you as sisters or?
> Madonna: No, between the family, between the family, you know, kind of not not not sort of taking as much care of each other's feelings I don't think,

> as we should have been doing, because we were all kind of just in a state of upheaval really

Madonna's experience of family disruption was compounded by the emotions of grief that she and Roxanne felt at the time. Her description of these emotions is complex: on the one hand she recounts how difficult she found it to witness Roxanne's emotions, on the other, these emotions created intimacy between them. Madonna looks back:

> Madonna: I was living with Roxanne not, not long after my dad had died and I remember there being er being one night where we were both just kind of, just in floods of tears and me not being able to cope with the fact that she was missing him really badly as well, and feeling like she wasn't allowed to kind of miss him in the same way as other people were, for whatever reason, I'm not quite sure about that really, but but that being quite a kind of turning-point really, the fact that we were able to sort of sit and cry together about the same thing, rather than not, than, rather than it being an experience that you were taking somebody else through, but it being kind of, like a sort of shared experience, really.

Here Madonna, as the youngest, is grappling with some of the changing dynamics in her relationship with Roxanne, resulting from their father's death. Her narrative points to her shock in a sense at witnessing her older sister's grief. This display of emotion contrasted, she seems to be saying, with her expectations at the time of 'taking somebody else through' an event, in this case, an assumption, perhaps, that Roxanne would comfort her rather than pour out her own grief. These expectations were not borne out; instead, grieving, for each of them, as Madonna says, became a 'shared experience'. Roxanne, in her account, comments that their father's death brought her and Madonna very close. This period of closeness between them coincided with a subtle form of *shifting positions*, an interlude for their relationship where they momentarily moved out of the 'big' and 'little' sister roles reflected in Madonna's expression 'shared experience'. However, the interlude remained brief, as it was disrupted by further events. This phase of their *best friendship* at the time of bereavement also marked the early stages of its ending.

The legacy of bereavement

Reflecting on the aftermath of bereavement, Madonna, eight years on, was still puzzling over its impact. Here she hints at the role of shifting power relations in the changing family structure:

> Madonna: a lot of it is to do with the, the, with the kind of, the sort of change of power I suppose, and things, things have been, there are kind of, like, different sort of stages but what are a very significant stage for me has

been since my father died and the kind of, the, the change of the sort of family make-up really.

Madonna captures these changes in the family structure in her description of her siblings' movement away from the natal family (Parkin 1997) in order to create worlds and lives of their own. In addition, she draws parallels between this outward mobility and her changing relationships with her sisters:

> Madonna: I think that's mainly it, I think what's happened is, it's taken that, that amount of time for us to kind of, sort of go away from the family in our, in our own ways and kind of like, be asserting our own personalities really and our, and our own kind of wants which has been different. I don't know, I'm not sure, I'm not actually sure what, what's, what's made the transition but relationships have, relationships have changed

Madonna's hesitant tone reflects the difficulty of verbalising these processes of change and transition, especially of pin-pointing precise moments or events. What is especially hard is to disentangle changes in the relationships from individual changes, or what I have called 'changing subjectivity'. Her expressions, 'asserting our own personalities' and 'our own kind of wants', refer to my notion of subjectivity which is explored further in the last Chapter (VIII). Madonna's musings on the effects of her father's death show her awareness of how it marked a break with her past and growing up, modifying her *best friendship* tie with Roxanne into a form which she could not yet articulate at that moment when it was occurring. These changes and the new kind of tie - *distant companionship* - between her and Roxanne only gradually became clear and explicit to them five years later with the end of Roxanne's marriage.

Turning-points: divorce

Whereas Madonna's narrative focused far more than Roxanne's on the effects of their bereavement, Roxanne's lingered over the impact of her divorce on her tie with Madonna, an issue that remained current, complex, painful and unresolved for her. Roxanne captures the *best friendship* aspects of their tie prior to the break-up of her marriage: she had moved jobs unsuccessfully and recalls Madonna's empathy at that time. She says:

> Roxanne: Madonna was very supportive through all that because it was very traumatic having moved my partner and my daughter [...] away from his job and her school and everything, so Madonna was really good then, um and she came to live with us for a bit when she did some [...] work [...] and so we got closer then, um and then she lived with us just before me and my husband split up, um, so it ought to put it in, in perspective about why we're not close now.

Roxanne recounts the closeness at this time when Madonna lived with her and her family in contrast with the subsequent distance after her divorce. When she uses the term 'in perspective', she is foreshadowing the problems that ensued with Madonna's anger at the marital break-up. Here, Roxanne is hinting at elements which made it difficult for Madonna to accept the 'split'. Roxanne examines the impact of the 'split' on her tie with Madonna further:

> Roxanne: I think my split with my partner caused all sorts of ripples which I couldn't understand at the time, that you know, I have a bit more of a perspective on now. Um, so none, none of us are very close now because I think, I've just, haven't quite sort of fitted in where I should have done

The ramifications of Roxanne's divorce have, in her words, extended beyond the realm of her relationships with her sisters. They have also impinged on her subjectivity which, in the above extract, she alludes to from the vantage-point of others, of how she is perceived by them in a way that makes her unacceptable: this is apparent in her words 'fitted in'. The contrast between the past and the present is also pertinent here for the production of knowledge: Roxanne's words clearly reveal the benefit of time for understanding complex moments of change in relationships.

Roxanne examines in more detail the intricate web between the legacy of her divorce, her tie with Madonna and her own changing subjectivity. She recalls Madonna's refusal to accept both her divorce and her new partner, Trevor. She describes Madonna's anger at her and Madonna's possessiveness:

> Roxanne: I think Madonna saw me as a bit different and when I split with Stuart [ex-husband] I think she wanted me to stay on my own for some reason, you know she wanted me to sort of go it alone and, and she seemed very possessive of my time [...]. Madonna wouldn't accept, wouldn't accept us as a couple. She gave me a real hard time about coupledom and, you know, and attacked my feminism and everything, you know, on the grounds of, you know, aren't you an individual on your own, why've you, why've you Trev around all the time, sort of thing

Roxanne's hunch about Madonna's expectations of her in relation to heterosexuality is confirmed by Madonna's words when she says: 'you want to see them being strong really and I suppose with, in whatever relationship there are always difficulties with men.'

Interpretations: bogey-men

One interpretation of Roxanne's narrative of her experience of disapproval in the eyes of Madonna, is that it is about a younger sister's lack of acceptance of an older sister's change

in the context of sexual relationships. In fact, Madonna herself talks about her difficulty with embracing this new turn in Roxanne's life, with specific mention of the 'new man'. Interestingly, Madonna introduces the notion of power in her analysis, and throughout, her emphasis is on the way that Roxanne's parting with her husband and new romance has brought about changes in their sister relationship:

> Madonna: I don't know where the kind of power lies with Roxanne really, it's, it's... yeah, no, I don't know where that lies really, it's kind of, things have changed because she, she's been in a new relation, well not a new relationship, she's been in a relationship other than um than her sort of, her, her long term partner for like the last, I don't know actually, two and a half years, three years. And things have changed quite considerably there really because of, because of Trev and because I've found it quite hard to sort of warm to Trev that, and I don't know what that's about really.

These are changes in their sister tie which Madonna finds hard to encapsulate: in her attempts to verbalise them, she talks about them in terms of Roxanne's changing subjectivity, she hints at changing power relations between them, and also reluctantly admits to the interference of sexual relationships in sister ties. Madonna continues:

> Madonna: You know, if I'm honest I don't know why I am finding so difficult to sort of get on with this person. But um, but I am and she is very, very kind of, within that relationship and I think she has found the confidence within that relationship to kind of kick a couple of us up the arse really and kind of say, you, you can't treat me like that any more, whatever that treatment is [...] the relationship, the power, I don't know if it's power or what it is really but the kind of the importance of that relationship for, for Roxanne has changed quite considerably over the last couple of years and I don't know and I don't know what that's to do with. And it's one of those things where you kind of think, I can't worry about other people's relationships. I have enough problem kind of like making sure mine are, are working on a sensible sort of positive basis without worrying about how other people are doing it, really.

Roxanne's understanding of Madonna's emotions and the changes in their tie relate to their distinct notions of feminism, experiences of heterosexuality (Roxanne's serial coupledom versus Madonna's more long-standing singledom) and, following on from these, inconsistencies between principles and praxis. Roxanne says:

> Roxanne: I think Madonna would say that, that I haven't behaved in a feminist manner over my relationship with Trev but I don't understand that, you know, I don't understand that at all. I think that's just, you know because Madonna's on her, yeah, she had a big thing about us touching in front of her, you know, and it was like - you're oppressing me because I'm a

> single person on my own. But you know I, I will take that argument as long as somebody doesn't offer it hypocritically. But when she was with her bloke, you know, they'd be all over each other and it just didn't wash really [laughter] [...] I mean can you look at the sisters' relationships without looking at men and the way in which men move in and out of women's lives and the way, you know, women's position generally has got to inform how women interact as sisters?

Roxanne here touches on a sensitive aspect of sister relationships to do with the impact of sexual relationships on their tie. Just as Roxanne says 'I don't understand that at all', regarding Madonna's disapproving reaction to her new sexual relationship, Madonna similarly says about Roxanne's response to this rift between them, 'I don't know what that's about really'. In this sense, the sisters produced, in separate narratives, an 'allied account' (Song 1998) of gaps and absences of knowledge and understanding in their relationship. Madonna says:

> Madonna: that's kind of quite hard the fact that I, she, she wants, she wants me to kind of, just take on this new person completely er but then at the same time, she's quite happy to say, I don't care what anybody thinks, this new person's in my life and. So that's kind of quite hard because there is a real contradiction in the kind of messages that she's giving out because on one hand she doesn't care and then on the other hand, she's very kind of, obviously very hurt about the fact that, I don't know, I don't know what that's about really.

Madonna's tale of her experience of contradictory emotions regarding the impact of Roxanne's new man in their lives and both sisters' incomprehension at recent developments in their relationship signals an impasse between them. One explanation for this impasse is the absence of dialogue between them about their emotional responses to recent events in their lives.

Emotions, whispers and silence

Before exploring further interpretations offered by the sisters on their stalemate, I consider the attempts Roxanne and Madonna have each made to verbalise their distress about their current situation to the other. Roxanne tried to talk to Madonna about her feelings with little success:

> Roxanne: she's quite a prima donna and so if you challenge her over something she gets all weepy and huffy and, and in the end it wasn't worth it to me, it wasn't worth keep making that challenge because it was in her face, you know, what, what she liked was to be allowed to get away with her humps

Roxanne initiated contact which turned into conflict. She found it difficult to spell out the precise nature of her grievances and could not be open and direct. She speculates on the link between this silence and the distance that ensued between them:

> Roxanne: we just ended up having big outbursts which I just thought why, why is this happening and it's happened because I couldn't say what I thought. I realise, you know my, this is my analysis and obviously she would have a totally different one, but I felt that I simply couldn't say what I thought without it causing her grief.
> MM: So you didn't, you didn't tell her?
> Roxanne: I did now and again, you know, which is I think why she avoids my company but I also thinks she avoids my company because she knows that there's somebody incredibly important to me in my life and I think she's quite jealous.

Here Roxanne hints at her ultimate and partial interpretation of events when she refers to Madonna's jealousy of her new sexual relationship. I return to the emotion of jealousy in the next section.

The silence between the sisters as documented by Roxanne (to whom I spoke before Madonna) raised doubts in my mind about Madonna's willingness to take part in the study. Roxanne reassured me that she might well participate and then elaborated with regret that 'that's part of the problem, that I've never had the opportunity to talk through the issues with them you know...'. At the same time she confessed to feeling nervous at the prospect of my collecting other stories from her sisters, and especially at my not hearing incidents initially from the party concerned:

> Roxanne: I feel nervous that you, that you will let them know that you have information but then that's stupid because they'll know. They'll know that you have all sorts of information. [...] I don't think I've told you anything that confidential actually [...]

She felt it would be better if certain information about events and changes in her sisters' lives came from the horse's mouth and I concurred. This is how Roxanne described her assumptions about my interview technique which is what I adopted: 'I presume that's how you'd work anyway. You'd start as if from scratch.'

Interpretations: jealousy

As a result of the silences between Madonna and Roxanne, each resorted to their own versions and explanations of the impasse in their relationship. The main factor to emerge was that of jealousy, or the 'green-eyed monster' as Mildred put it, sexual jealousy on the

one hand, and sister jealousy on the other to do with possessiveness of Madonna as the 'baby' of the family. For Roxanne, certainly jealousy over sexual relationships shed light on some of the tensions in her tie with Madonna in the context of Madonna's lack of 'traditional success with men'. Other factors that Roxanne mentioned included age: her new partner's age placed him as a near contemporary to Madonna in contrast with Roxanne's ex-husband who was older than herself. Roxanne guessed that Madonna found this age issue threatening. Roxanne explained her frustrations at trying to resolve the tension between her and Madonna over her lover and her disbelief at the plausibility of the jealousy interpretation:

> Roxanne: friends on the outside sort of said that to me and I thought what, you know, what does that mean? I've never ever let Trev get in the way of us meeting up, or you know me having time available but in fact I went out of my way because she showed how irritated she was. I'd like, you know, put Trev off for an evening or say, you know, come down and we'll be on our own and then I got to thinking why should I do that, you know, this person is part of my life and she's either got to accept that or we can't have the sort of relationship that I want. But then other people, friends also said, maybe it's also a jealousy about you and men because she had, she had a, she had a real sort of go about Trev. [...] so people put it to me that maybe she was really pissed off that not only had you got this nice bloke who you believe in but, but there was this other nice bloke who's nearly 12 years younger than you and she, she was maybe jealous of that. I didn't want to accept that though because I actually believe that she's brighter than that, you know.

Jealousy is also put forward by Madonna as a possible interpretation for the tension between her and Roxanne, in this case jealousy to do with Madonna's closer relationship with Jeanne. Madonna hints at the mixed allegiances in the family and the vying that ensues between her three older sisters for the ability to privilege their tie with Madonna as part of the *positioned* discourse, where she remains the 'little' sister and by extension, their 'baby'. In this setting of rivalry for the affection and ownership (Hey 1997) of their 'baby' sister, Madonna finds herself in a difficult position as she gets on with all of them whereas they have conflictual relationships with each other. Madonna speculates that Roxanne may be jealous of her relationship with Jeanne as Jeanne and Roxanne do not get on. Madonna says:

> Madonna: There's always been a bit of kind of like, um, oh I suppose you'll be going to Jeanne's for Christmas again, or you, that kind of thing, or I expect you talk to Jeanne about things like that or

Madonna's example of how Roxanne gets angry when Madonna maintains her loyalty with Jeanne, with whom she has a tie of *close companionship*, illustrates this jealousy. Madonna describes Roxanne's anger at her refusal to be an intermediary or go-between between her and Jeanne. Madonna explains:

> Madonna: we have different relationships and you must kind of sort it out between the two of you which they never do [...] Roxanne finds it much harder to deal with because it's like I'm closing down on her and because she, you know, because she, by that, by that sort of stage in the conversation she's kind of fairly hyped up, it's like, well what do you fucking mean, why won't you tell me, you know and it's that sort of um, it's like I'm hiding something and it's like I'm in allegiance with somebody else. I mean, there's a real kind of feeling of like sort of mixed allegiances and kind of, which is really hard to deal with, very hard to deal with because I feel like I'm not being loyal to, to either of them. [...] they'd rather deal with it through a third party rather than...

When Madonna says 'it's like I'm closing down on her', there is a hint of the shifting power relations between her and Roxanne which I turn to next.

Interpretations: growing pains

Madonna herself is aware of how she is situated in the *positioned* discourse as the 'baby' of the family, an enviable location which has brought her certain benefits. For example, she is the only one in the family who receives Christmas presents from her sisters: they only buy gifts for each other's children, not each other. The other side, however, is less rosy: Madonna reflects on the shocks that she encountered as the youngest as, one after another, her sisters divorced. Her reaction to Roxanne's 'split' looked at in the context of her experience of the break-up of her two other sisters' marriages sheds light on the negative aspects of her positioning as the 'baby' sister. Roxanne's 'split' aroused similar emotions in her as with the earlier divorces. Here, Madonna describes her experience of this pattern and its emotional impact on her. She begins with her elder sister Leonie's divorce and positions herself in relation to her and her ex-husband as 'both of their babies':

> Madonna: I hated her [elder sister Leonie] for the fact that he'd gone away, you know, because I was, I was both of their babies you know. And it was and I kind of, the minute, the minute I'd reached where I realised how, what a disgusting like child I'd been, being so horrid to my sister because she'd been dumped by her husband, you know it was just, I kind of, I kind of vowed never to do it again really. Um, so I, I think I have, I've always tried to be very loyal to both Roxanne and Jeanne in the sort of, the break up of their marriages, but at the same time it has been quite hard, it was very hard with me with Roxanne and Stuart because I did, I did like Stuart an awful lot. Um, it wasn't quite so hard with [laughter] with Jeanne and Thomas

> because I didn't actually like her husband very much so that was kind of, that was ok. Um, but...yeah, but there were, there were definitely divided loyalties in terms of feeling very much like into, you know, for the sake of sisterhood, I should have been there for Roxanne but sort of, sort of somewhere emotionally feeling a bit kind of upset really.

Significantly, Madonna refers to herself as the 'baby' or 'child' in relation to her elder sister Leonie and her former husband, illustrating the extent to which sisters in the *positioned* discourse regard each other as 'mother' and 'child', especially in this case where the age gap is considerable: Madonna is 17 years younger than Leonie. Madonna is aware of the recurring pattern, of her renewed anger at each family fragmentation. At the same time, she was determined to learn from the first divorce and to react differently, in a more supportive way of her sisters, subsequently. In practice, however, this proved problematic owing to the demands of her own subjectivity in the midst of these break-ups. Her insights into her own emotions highlight her conflicting response, torn between, on the one hand, her sisterly loyalty and, on the other, her rage and sadness at the dissolution of couples upon whom she was dependent.

Madonna became weary of experiencing these emotions third-time round when Roxanne broke up with her husband. She touches on the web of relationships that connect sisters and their lovers and the impossibility of not becoming ensnared in these changing emotions and ties. Madonna elaborates:

> Madonna: then Roxanne then splitting up with Stuart, it was like, oh I'm not doing this again. I'm not going through all this shit again of like dealing with somebody else's relationship break-up and that I think, that's what it was, it was feeling like I was dealing with other people's relationships and, and but that's what happens with sisters, because you do get drawn into their relationships, because they're kind of so important really, because they, they kind of mould the people that they become and certainly influence the people that they are, you know.

She describes her resentment, her wish to remain distant from the emotions and the difficulty of keeping aloof from the significant others in her sisters' lives.

Furthermore, Madonna recognises the inconsistency of her lack of understanding towards her sisters in contrast with their unstinting support of her own trials and tribulations in the land of heterosexuality. Her sisters, she says, have stood by her:

> Madonna: Followed me through the most outrageous relationships and been just incredibly supportive until I've seen the, sort of seen the light myself

really. So, I haven't done very well by them have I? [laughter] And that's alright because I'm the kid sister!
MM: [laughter]
Madonna: So, yeah, quite, yeah.
MM: So it sounds like there are times when it's quite nice to be the kid sister?
Madonna: Oh, yeah definitely.
MM: To revert to that.
Madonna: Definitely. I try not to do it. I really do try not to do it, um but um...um.
Madonna & MM: [laughter]

Madonna's reflexivity on the ups and downs of being the 'kid sister' reveal its contradictions and her difficulties with moving out of this long established role in the *positioned* discourse. Her enjoyment and pain at her 'kid sister' position in the realm of heterosexuality is reminiscent of her ambivalent feelings when she was positioned as 'big sister' vis-a-vis Roxanne after their father died.

Shifting positions: bye bye baby

Madonna's ambivalence about adopting the 'big sister' position at specific transition moments to do with bereavement and marital break-up illustrates the challenges of shedding the 'kid sister' skin. Indeed, as she says herself, this position enabled her, in a sense, to let herself off the hook at certain moments when she felt put upon by her older sisters when they reverted to something she abhorred, such as telling her how to organise her life. In the following extract, Madonna muses pertinently on her new-found awareness of her own power and its likely connection with the difficulties that she has encountered in her changing relationship with Roxanne. Madonna says:

Madonna: I've never had any power [laughter] up until now um I, I think, up until the last kind of year, literally the last year or so. I've always been not, actually that's not quite so true of my relationship with Roxanne um, although because I am the youngest, I've always tended to see that being the problem, that I've been treated as the youngest where in actual fact, that's not always been the case. And I, and, and kind of, now I've sort of peaked 30 and you know, I'm sort of, you know, I'm in my thirty-somethings and it's and it is obviously very difficult for them to see me as the baby anymore. Um, but things have, the, the power has kind of shifted. I'm now kind of very, quite obviously seen as a woman by the rest of them and, and have a power which to be honest, until sort of two years, 18 months ago, I actually didn't realise I had. And that, and I think that's been the kind of like, I think that's, thinking about the sort of difficulties and the transition in the relationships, I think that's been a lot to do with it. I was very unaware of the power that I had um because I was, I did find it very easy to slip into thinking, they're just treating me like a child again, you know it's like, they've been there, they've done it and they're telling me what to do again, you know, when will they stop doing it.

Madonna's detailed account presents a fascinating exploration of her analysis of the shifting power relations between her and her sisters, especially Roxanne.

Here, Madonna grapples with the implications of leaving behind the 'kid sister' position almost for good and the emotional hurdles involved for her. Her words encapsulate the difficulty in practice of moving out of one discourse and into another: one of the consequences of abandoning the *positioned* discourse lies in the emotional demands required of the *shifting positions* discourse where the roles fluctuate and are less entrenched. Madonna vividly describes this process:

> Madonna: It freaks me out, I mean I can't cope with any of them when they're upset but um...that's a bit of a contradiction really isn't it. I've just said that it's easier to cope with but, but I do find it very difficult. But I'm, I, but I have realised as I've sort of, the last couple of years, that I have to deal with that if I want to be taken seriously as a grown up, as a grown up sister. I have to cope with the fact that they will come to me in tears occasionally and that I can't look to them and just to being the sort of caring older sisters really.

Madonna continues:

> Madonna: I find it, I find it really quite hard when the roles are reversed and they are, they are being very vulnerable because it does make me feel incredibly grown up, you know incredibly old. The fact that they are there doing that with me and I think, shit, you know they must be, they must be relying on me. That's never been, that's never been so much the case with Roxanne and I, and yet I still have a, I still haven't, I still haven't acknowledged it until really recently. You know there have been times when Roxanne and I have just been in the most awful slanging matches and, and she's been saying things to me, but I, and I've been thinking, but I'm the kid, you know, but I'm the kid sister. Why are you saying this to me, I, I shouldn't be expected to do that, I'm the young one. But then, but then being very aware of the fact that there never has been that kind of power thing between the two of us anyway but that's me kind of hiding behind the kind of kid sister apparel really.

Madonna's narrative reflects the difficulties involved in entering the *shifting positions* discourse premised on greater parity than the *positioned* discourse. The way that she toys with holding on to and letting go of her position as 'kid sister' in her relationship with Roxanne suggests its lure and seductiveness for her and the costs of bidding it farewell.

Shifting positions: hello baby doll

The other side of the role reversal, experienced by Roxanne, is as complex for her as for Madonna, but in a different way. As we saw, as Madonna became aware of her new power, she struggled in order to come to terms with her ambivalence towards the potential emotional requests her sisters might make of her as new 'big sister'. For Roxanne, however, an unforeseen consequence of Madonna's ambivalence about shedding her 'little sister' skin and moving out of the *positioned* discourse, was to find herself being positioned by Madonna as 'little sister'. This is how Roxanne describes this new negative phenomenon which she experienced:

> Roxanne: she's treated me like I'm a little sister actually, that's how people observe it, that's how Jeanne observes it. She was once round on one of the rare occasions that we're, we're all together and she said to Madonna, God you talk to her like she's your little sister! And she does. And for a long time I accepted it because my relationship with her was so important to me and it was, you know, she was like a friend, she, out of all my sisters she was the one that I could say, she's like me, you know, I feel that I can relate to this person, we have similar politics, we have, you know she's a feminist um, she's arty, I'm arty, you know there were loads of things that were very similar.
> MM: Mmmm
> Roxanne: So I didn't want to lose that. So I would put up with her treating me like a little sister and I would put up with her sulks and, but then, I know it sounds corny, but then Trev became too important to me you know I, I thought at last I've found a relationship where I feel like I can be me and I could see the way my sisters weren't allowing me to be me so I thought, stuff this, and started confronting Madonna and I did say to her, you know why, why is it not ok, and she actually said, well because I have different expectations of you.
> MM: That you'd be some kind of tough cookie?
> Roxanne: I don't know really, she could never really explain it. Just, she'd just say, there's no point in you quoting Jeanne to me and what I allowed Jeanne to do without getting in a huff with her because you're not Jeanne, you're not like her! I expect different things of you. But I didn't know what, you know, I didn't know what I wasn't living up to.

This lack of dialogue between the two of them left the sisters in a stalemate. When Roxanne looks back at her relationship with Madonna in the past and compares it with the new turn that it has taken in the present, she concludes that exiting the *positioned* discourse and moving into the *shifting positions* discourse is difficult. She reflects on the shifting power relations between them and the way that perhaps her relationship with Madonna was more manageable when they were located in their conventional roles according to age, in the *positioned* discourse, as 'big' and 'kid' sister. Their narratives reveal the lack of smoothness

in the transformation of their relationship. Unlike Leila and *Annar*'s tie, Roxanne and Madonna's has changed in a negative and difficult way for them. Roxanne says:

> Roxanne: Like my relationship with Madonna was easier.
> MM: When there was a slight imbalance?
> Roxanne: Yeah, yeah... Because equality is difficult isn't it?
> MM: Yes!
> Roxanne & MM: [laughter]
> MM: That's [what] I was thinking about.
> Roxanne: Most people find it difficult.
> MM: It, it, it, it's um
> Roxanne: Most, I think, most relationships are, are premised on some sort of inequality. That inequality may fluctuate but I think quite often where relationships appear to be going well, you know somebody has the upper hand or somebody is in a position of mentor or guide or whatever [...]

Roxanne reflects on the changing power relations between them, the difficulty of attaining a balance or equality, and the silences in her relationship with Madonna. Roxanne says:

> Roxanne: It's difficult to negotiate when you've had something very different.
> MM: Um
> Roxanne: In any relationship, isn't it, it's not just sisters, it's like anything at all where you've had something different, to then, for one person to become more powerful is just too often, too difficult for it to work.
> MM: But why, why do you, well you've talked about why it hasn't happened with your sisters but are you, are you, are you disappointed, does it bug you?
> Roxanne: Yeah, I can't say. It doesn't, I do feel, it's not so much disappointment as lack of justice. You know, I've always had a very very strong sense of justice ever since I was a kid when I got blamed for things that I hadn't done, you know and I do, I do feel strongly that people have a right of reply um and it's and it's more that...that I wish, that I wish that it, it was possible to talk through the issues with them but it isn't. It just isn't [...]. And with Madonna it's just it would be too painful for her, she doesn't want us to be equals, she wants to be able to talk badly to me which she's done all her adult life and I've taken it. And I'm disappointed, yeah with Madonna I am, because we are, as I said, out of them all we are the most similar, we have the most in common you know, I like, I like lots of things about her um but not enough to tolerate her spoilt behaviour because it's like saying, it's like saying beat me over the head, you know, and I'm worth more. I have a much stronger sense of myself I think than I ever have before and I'm just not prepared to put up with as much crap as I have been in the past. Life's too short.
> MM: Yeah.
> Roxanne: But I do, but I do, you know back to what you said, I do, I do miss, it seems odd, I think it's more about me thinking I should need

> something from a family but I don't, you know I don't seem to miss them that much really.

Roxanne's sadness, disappointment and resignation to the stalemate is palpable. This admission of the state of the power relations in their relationship is a difficult one. Both sisters are unhappy with the status quo and yet neither is able to resolve the complex issues involved. Instead, the impact of the transitions which they have experienced to do with bereavement and marital break-up has transformed their relationship from one of *best friendship* to one of *distant companionship*.

In addition, their tie has become stuck in its path out of the *positioned* discourse, when Madonna was always the 'kid sister' with its benefits and disadvantages. While Roxanne and Madonna have each experimented with moving their relationship into the *shifting positions* discourse, this process has stalled in a negative way. In order for this process to be positive, Madonna and Roxanne would each need to be more accepting of her sister's changing subjectivity. Roxanne would have to respect the privacy of Madonna's independent bond with Jeanne and her refusal to mediate between Roxanne and Jeanne. Madonna would have to respect Roxanne's sexual autonomy and her relationship with her new partner, Trevor. For Madonna to shift positions and become emotionally Roxanne's 'big sister' in moments of crisis, she would also have to embrace the new responsibility that comes with this shift.

Distant lives, still voices[2]

Both Madonna and Roxanne provide an 'allied account' (Song 1998) of their tie in their current lives: they are more distant than they were in earlier decades, there are silences between them, and they enjoy less intimacy and less contact than in the past. Madonna looks back at her changing relationship with Roxanne:

> Madonna: I don't, well maybe no, didn't used to be Roxanne's baby, but I used, I definitely used to be Roxanne's friend, you know. We kind of used to sort of hang out together, do you know what I mean and go clothes shopping and things, when I especially, when I was living with her. And um and that's moved on I suppose just in terms of being in different places, her being in a different relationship than when I was living with her. Um, I think that, that's been, I mean that is, that is to do with men. That is to do with men and the fact that I haven't completely denounced her ex-husband completely and taken on this new partner.

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2 This is adapted from the title of Terence Davies' film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, a fictionalised and autobiographical account of his childhood growing up in a working-class family in Liverpool (1988).

And she continues:

> Madonna: we kind of, we kind of throw it at each other Jeanne and Roxanne and I really. Jeanne, not so much, but Roxanne and I certainly do in terms of well, I can't, no, I can't explain it, I really can't explain it. We don't talk healthily about, well, things aren't going well at the moment. I mean, Roxanne, I, I get the feeling at the moment that Roxanne, well it's not a feeling, I know, Roxanne will not talk to me about anything bad that happens between Trev and her because she doesn't want me to think that there is, there could possibly be anything bad in that relationship. So it's, it's um, you're kind of at a bit of a dead end street really in terms of that and I think that's how men affect us really, the fact that they kind of close down certain areas for, for conversation, that our friendship doesn't override the, the traumas of a, of our personal relationships. It kind of, it acts as a, as a kind of barrier really because we're too frightened to admit that we're doing things wrong. [...] I think it's, it's not always been the case about things but, but I think there is, I mean we, [sighs] are we competitive? I don't know but I, I, it's almost that it's almost that fear of not wanting to be seen to be doing things wrong.

Madonna attributes their changing relationship to the impact of men in their lives, especially in Roxanne's life, and to the reduced talk flowing between them. Roxanne, on the other hand, notes the way that change in their relationship has been gradual - one of the indicators which she mentions are the changing contact patterns between them:

> Roxanne: I think a lot about the issues and why it is how it is at the moment. I've thought, thought it through endlessly really recently because it's so noticeably different, not noticeably different, it's just, it's been quite gradual actually but I know now that it's reached a point where we are not regularly keeping in touch whereas before I always knew that Madonna would ring every now and then... whereas I'm sure that now, it's very much, you know, I'll ring her and then she'll respond and I think well I can rise above that, you know. I will do that just because partly because I want to have the higher moral ground I suppose [laughter]

Below the bubble

Roxanne and Madonna no longer get 'below the bubble' in their dealings with one another. The 'inter-connect personal' element described by Roxanne which she used to enjoy, including moments of telepathy, has vanished from her sister tie. Instead, they find it difficult to talk about recent changes in their relationship. Madonna, the former 'baby sister', resisted becoming a go-between for Roxanne and Jeanne, who have little contact, and there has been some jealousy as Madonna is now closer to Jeanne than Roxanne. In addition, Roxanne's new partner and their distinct attitudes towards their mother have been the source of tension and conflict between them.

After Roxanne split with her husband, she had a difficult time with Madonna and they became more distant. She felt treated as a 'little' sister by her, so in a sense the roles became reversed. Madonna was angry about the break-up and, according to Roxanne, possibly jealous of her new partner Trevor who is almost the same age as Madonna (and Madonna is single). Roxanne says 'none of us are very close now because I haven't fitted in where I should have'. An image of Roxanne as the rebel in the family comes across: as a child, she says, 'I'd been seen as wayward'. One interpretation is that she has rebelled against the way that both Jeanne and Madonna have positioned her as 'little' sister. She has confronted Madonna about being treated like a 'little' sister and big outbursts ensued: 'I couldn't say what I thought without it causing her grief'. Roxanne's understanding of all this is: 'my sisters weren't allowing me to be me'. Events which have changed relationships between the sisters are their father's death and Roxanne's divorce. Roxanne sees herself as the most 'feminist', as she says, of all her sisters and also as not being 'prepared to compromise'.

From Roxanne's perspective, several factors have contributed to her estrangement from Madonna and her other sisters, including the rift that occurred between the sisters over their disagreement about how to 'be' with their mother. When Roxanne says, 'I don't need to do these things to keep people happy', in the context of feeling let down by her elder sister Leonie, she is also referring to Madonna - Madonna who did not offer her support in her new sexual relationship and Madonna who now regards and treats Roxanne as a 'little' sister. Roxanne says:

> Roxanne: So there's all these factors, you know that have converged at this particular time, for me, when I'm the happiest that I've ever been in my life, so perhaps I need them less as well, you know. But I think it's also as I said, it's to do with getting older and not needing that sort of approval [...]

Roxanne's changing subjectivity has played a significant role in her changing relationship with Madonna: one interpretation is that she has safeguarded her subjectivity at the cost of distancing herself from her sisters. This is perhaps a negative instance of 'shifting positions' where Roxanne (39) has moved out of her new positioning as 'little' sister by Madonna (31) through distancing herself: while this had a positive effect for Roxanne's changing subjectivity, it had a negative impact on her tie with Madonna. In other cases, this flexibility has been positive, with each sister in turn adopting the 'big' or 'little' positioning, for example, Hazel and Phoebe, and Suzanne and Collette (see Chapter VII). Roxanne's attempts to move out of the *positioned* discourse have had a negative effect on her sister relationships since her sisters have resisted Roxanne's move away from the 'little' sister position. The price has been conflict and distance. Roxanne appears to have changed; she

has become distant from the rest of her family, as she herself says in the words 'perhaps I need them less'. At the same time, this is a painful process for her.

Roxanne was less successful than other women in the study whose changing subjectivity and move out of 'big' or 'little sister' positionings were positive for both the sister tie and each woman's subjectivity. Phoebe, for example, as described in the next chapter, managed to end her positioning as 'big' sister and swap roles with her younger sister, Hazel. This change in behaviour is implicitly connected to their individual changing subjectivity, their sense of self, which in Phoebe and Roxanne's cases, becomes less 'other' or duty orientated and more self-directed. In Phoebe's case, this change was accepted by her sister Hazel; in Roxanne's, her attempts to modify both her subjectivity and the dynamics of her tie with Madonna led to conflict and resistance, partly as we saw, owing to Madonna's hesitancy and caution about fully embracing the 'big sister' position, especially regarding the management of emotions.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how change occurs in sister relationships at different moments in their trajectories. Its focus was on triggers for change - specific life events such as bereavement and divorce. Inevitably, these turning-points leave their mark on sister relationships. As one woman succinctly described this series of transitions: 'there is a sort of a path of, sort of, you know, your adolescence days and then you getting married or you decide to live with [a] partner and then you have children and you sort of settle into some sort of cosy, sort of middle aged thing and, you know, and, and it changes...'.

Change in sister relationships can happen at two levels, external to the relationship and internally. External change can occur in connection with life events - leaving home, going to boarding school, moving to a different city, acquiring or losing a sexual partner or parent. The *companionship-best friendship* element of the tie corresponds to this descriptive level. Sisters move from forms of *companionship* to *best friendship* over the decades and from *best friendship* to forms of *companionship*.

Change can also happen internally, within the relationship, with movement in and out of the *positioned* discourse into or out of the *shifting positions* discourse. This process occurred in Leila and *Annar*'s relationship which moved from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse. This was a positive experience for both their tie and their individual subjectivities. However, Roxanne and Madonna's tie, after a brief experiment with moving into the *shifting positions* discourse, stalled in a negative way, locked in the *positioned* discourse in the aftermath of their father's death: the two sisters remain unhappy in their

current stalemate. Another life event, Roxanne's marital 'split' and relationship with her new partner Trevor, led Madonna to position herself as 'big sister' regarding Roxanne. This may have been a reaction to the dissolution of yet another family unit, in addition to her natal family (Parkin 1997), on which she had relied to construct herself in earlier decades as 'kid sister'. In a sense, perhaps, Madonna is rebelling against all of this family fragmentation, by moving from one positioning to another - from 'kid' to 'big' sister - with feelings of extreme ambivalence.

The main theme in this chapter is how relationships change as a result of life events. They change in the context of shifting power relations and changing subjectivity. The role of language and whether sisters talk to each other or not about their emotions and experiences is significant: Leila and *Annar* each voiced their feelings whereas Madonna and Roxanne tried to and were unsuccessful. The 'shifting point' in Leila and *Annar*'s relationship came with the family rift when both sisters sided with their parents and one brother against their three other brothers who took over the family business from their father.

In terms of the factors involved in these changing ties, a central element is the extent to which there is reflexivity in relationships about emotions and different experiences: reflexivity as knowledge, as a means of transcending power relations, and of acknowledging difference. One explanation for Roxanne and Madonna's inability to extricate themselves from the *positioned* discourse and into the *shifting positions* one, which one of them hints at, is their inability to face and incorporate their differences positively into their relationship. In the next chapter, the two analytic strands of the typology, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses, are explored in detail.

Chapter VII

The Positioned and Shifting Positions Discourses

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The Positioned and Shifting Positions Discourses

Introduction

Following on from the analysis of the two descriptive strands of the typology - *best friendship* and *companionship* in Chapter V, this chapter illustrates the two analytical strands, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. The focus is on these discourses against the background of the two descriptive strands. These two discourses first mentioned in Chapter IV (see section 5) with the example of Beth and Louise's relationship, and in the last chapter, are fleshed out further here through three case studies. The chapter is in five sections: first, the two discourses are briefly outlined again. In the next three sections, Suzanne's relationship with *Collette*, Jeanne's account of 'mothering' and 'being mothered', and Hazel and Phoebe's relationship are examined in light of their oscillations between the two discourses. In the last section, I reflect on the impact of some of the women's experiences of counselling and therapy on the knowledge produced in their narratives.

The three case studies have different statuses in terms of the data presented: Suzanne's is an individual account as *Collette* did not take part in the study. Hazel and Phoebe's narratives are separate and 'allied' accounts. Jeanne's is a separate account which I am analysing in isolation from the narratives of her sisters who did take part in the study. There are two reasons for this: one, in order to preserve the anonymity of some facets of this set of sisters; and two, the relationship between Roxanne and Madonna, two of Jeanne's sisters, was explored in the previous chapter. Here, the focus is on Jeanne's narrative of her subjectivity in terms of 'mothering' in relation to the two discourses at the heart of this chapter.

1. Definitions

The three case studies are discussed in terms of both the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses in order to highlight three themes: the first is the way that power relations and emotions are interwoven within relationships through these two discourses; the second shows how relationships go through different phases over time. A third reason for approaching sister ties by deconstructing the discourses in which women as sisters relate to each other is to examine the construction of feminine subjectivity against this backdrop (Butler 1990). I return to subjectivity in detail in Chapter VIII. Part of what I am interested

in tracing is the way that the family 'produces' femininity or feminine subjectivity - or what Hall terms 'cultural identity'. Identity, he says, is formed through both the past and the future, as well as the present, and is in a constant state of flux and transformation:

> ...is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall 1990:225)

The *positioned* discourse would appear to reproduce elements of mother-daughter relationships and can be equated with the concept of the 'minimother' (Edelman 1994:139) usually, though not necessarily, associated with the 'big sister' role and the child with the 'little sister'. Although Edelman employs the term 'minimother' to refer to the caring work carried out by daughters for kin, mainly siblings and fathers, in the context of mother-loss and bereavement, this notion of caring work for kin is relevant in other contexts. Beth and Hazel talked about mothering their mothers, Suzanne mentioned her 'big sisterly bit coming out...' regarding *Collette*, Annabel talked about 'being bossy' towards Chloe, Zoe was aware of her protectiveness or tendency to tell Sofia 'what to do', and Vandana insisted on paying for her younger sister Revi when they were out shopping. Positive attributes of the *positioned* discourse include caring and nurturing, protectiveness and responsibility for a sister or sibling; negative aspects include bossiness, the tendency to be domineering, dominating and directive, and the concentration of responsibility in minimothering which can be oppressive to *both* sisters.

This discourse which contains hegemonic[1] elements is not on the whole embraced from choice, but is more circumstantial. Yet as illustrated by Beth (Chapter IV) and Jeanne's experiences, explored in this chapter, it is a positioning which women can feel ambivalent about shedding. However, the potential exists for women to shed the positioning in which they have been located by activating their agentic subjectivity. Beth (in Chapter IV), for example, saw a way out of the *positioned* discourse and yet remained in it. And Madonna (in Chapter VI), who flirted with shedding this old skin, joked about the comforts of

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1 Here I am using the term hegemonic in order to refer to unequal power relations associated with minimothering. Hey (1997:84) uses the term 'hegemonic' in relation to racialised heterosexuality where girls take up dominating positions regarding other girls.

hanging on to her 'kid sister' positioning. As we saw in the last chapter, younger sisters such as Madonna can position themselves as 'big sister'. In a counter example, Rowena rejected her positioning as eldest and 'big' sister. In her narrative of growing up with *Grace*, Rowena says that she did not have a 'leading relationship' with her, she did not hold her hand to cross the road. The *positioned* discourse maps the way that women become subjects or objects in this discourse (Walkderdine 1994; Hall 1992) through adopting 'subordinate and dominant positions of power' (Hey 1997:92). This is a discourse of femininity, of emotional and practical mothering and caring, in which women as sisters can be highly invested, to use Hollway's term (1989) and which they often do enjoy because of the responsibility that comes with it. Zoe (17) and Phoebe (35) talk about the pleasures of being positioned as the older responsible sister. This discourse is experienced both positively and negatively by 'big' and 'little' sisters.

One question raised by the *positioned discourse* is whether or not it constitutes a friendship discourse. This question is difficult to answer and raises further questions. The *positioned* discourse would seem not to be a discourse of friendship if friendship is understood as based on mutuality, reciprocity and equitable exchange. However, this discourse is characterised by other positive elements to do with caring associated with friendship. In addition, if the *positioned* discourse coexists alongside the *shifting positions* discourse or even within it, then, as relationships fluctuate, it would appear, potentially, to contain certain aspects of friendship. The crucial element is that of the reversal or 'exchanging positions' (Lather 1988:577) in order to dislodge entrenched power relations and positions.

The *shifting positions* discourse reflects the phenomenon of role reversals in relationships or shifts in positions of power. It captures the way that subject positions can change over time within a relationship and embodies the post-structuralist notion of power as diffuse and fluctuating rather than fixed. This is a discourse of reciprocity, a counter-hegemonic discourse where power oscillates between sisters rather than remaining entrenched as in the *positioned* discourse. In that sense it is a feminist discourse and a positive one. On the negative side, the *shifting positions* discourse is permeable and preserves a space for women to revert back to the *positioned* discourse. This is illustrated in Madonna's oscillations in her relationship with Roxanne (see Chapter VI).

Is the *shifting positions* discourse also a friendship discourse? This is a problematic notion as friendship can contain elements of mothering, 'bitchiness' *and* power (Hey 1997). In the three case studies, I was intrigued by the women's awareness of these power dynamics in their relationships and I attempt to trace the way that these shifts in power occur. Some women act on their knowledge, insights and experience, whereas others do not: Suzanne

and *Collette*, Hazel and Phoebe move out of the *positioned* discourse successfully, whereas Jeanne contemplates that option and decides not to, thereby remaining positioned, about which she feels ambivalent. In section one, I turn to Suzanne's relationship with her younger sister *Collette* in order to illustrate how its trajectory has been marked by both the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses in relation to their mothering experiences.

2. Minimother and baby mother: Suzanne and Collette

Suzanne and *Collette*'s transition from girlhood to womanhood, and from *distant companionship* to *best friendship*, took form partly through the changing circumstances of their lives - teenage motherhood and leaving home - and partly through a shift in their own relationship from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse. Suzanne's (age 29) story of her relationship with *Collette* (age 25) can be divided into two parts. The first phase corresponds to their teenage years of *distant companionship* which intensified when a rift occurred and *Collette* left home: the sisters did not speak to each other for two months. The second phase is marked by their adult years in their twenties when they became best friends. The transition between the two phases occurred when their father died and *Collette* became a teenage mother.

Another life-time ago

When they were teenagers, Suzanne's mother did not encourage the sisters to be close: 'if we'd been too close she would have felt we was maybe ganging up against her', Suzanne says. The sisters were opposites: Suzanne was tidy and aloof, *Collette* messy and unruly. Suzanne ignored her and 'our paths did not cross that much':

> Suzanne: I was neat and tidy, she was really messy and she'd take my clothes out of the wardrobe, wear 'em, trash 'em, throw 'em on the floor and that would be, we would have a lot of arguments about that kind of thing. I don't know if that's quite a sisterly sort of, quite a general thing that drives sisters mad um but no we never, we never really talked.

> Suzanne: [...] from the few things she's said, she's always wanted me to really take a lot of interest in her but I was off doing whatever I wanted to do and sort of, and, and never really had much interest in her at all. Occasionally, you know, I'd sort of stop what I was doing and she'd be going out and I'd say, oh shall I do your hair for you, or shall I help you with, I started putting make-up on her and er, she said like she used to really enjoy that. She liked getting the attention off of me in that way

One possible explanation, according to Suzanne on the basis of her talks with *Collette*, for the distance between them as teenagers is to do with the issue of privacy in connection with their early sexual relationships:

> Suzanne: she says that she always felt that I was like this second mother, I was her second mother figure and she didn't want me to, I think probably what she was doing in her life, that at that time she, she, she knows I would have disapproved of it and that's probably why she never told me what was going on in her life.

Both sisters had abortions in their teens (Suzanne at 16, *Collette* at 12 and a half) which were not discussed in the family: at the time, each was unaware of the other's experience. There was a denial of sexuality in the household even though the sisters and their mother were all sexually active. In terms of their current sexual relationships, *Collette* knows that Suzanne disapproves of her boyfriend and Suzanne's own partner gives the sisters a lot of space to conduct their relationship.

Changing relationships

A turning-point in their relationship occurred when *Collette* in her mid-teens became a teenage mother at the same time as their father died. At 14, *Collette* became pregnant and the sisters grew closer as Suzanne became involved in supporting *Collette* during her pregnancy. She gave birth to her son Tristan and continued to live at home with Suzanne and their mother. This life event, teenage motherhood, coincided with another - the sudden death of the sisters' father. This devastating event did not bring the sisters closer, according to Suzanne. In spite of their parents being divorced, Suzanne ponders over the possible links between their bereavement and *Collette*'s decision to give birth rather than have an abortion. However, she can only speculate because 'we've never gone back that far really and, and sat down.' So this is a silence, an absence in their tie.

When Tristan was two, 'the whole set up of the family just got all blown out of the window'. Suzanne and her mother had taken over the care of the baby and policed *Collette*'s mothering skills. At the same time, they felt resentful of this responsibility and frustrated with *Collette* leading the life of a teenager rather than a mother. The tension in the household increased until it ended in a big fight between the sisters: *Collette* left home at 17 with her son age two. The sisters did not talk to each other for two months. Collette returned home for a short time while she waited to be rehoused and, since that era, the sisters have become best friends. Suzanne summarises these events, from *Collette* giving birth to the change it brought about in their relationship:

> Suzanne: ...that really put a big wedge between us really I suppose, although I was really happy that she was having a baby, for selfish reasons, just because I wanted a baby in the house. Um, it brought us closer in a way, she sort of um seemed to need me as a sister. She hadn't before, she was

> quite an independent sort of, we was quite separate in our lives, we wasn't close at all.

Collette's departure from the family home represented a crucial moment of change in Suzanne's eyes:

> Suzanne: ...after she'd sort of threw a few punches and been quite aggressive [laughter] I left the house, went over to my grandmother's house, just to get away from the situation, let her cool down. Um, I was gone for about half an hour and when I come back she'd gone and she'd taken Tristan with her in the middle of the night and that was really a big turning-point in our lives because she then left and she never come back.

Looking back over the years to the changes in their relationship, Suzanne pin-points the key moment:

> Suzanne: I really felt that she should have said, she should have apologised but she never did really, until now. She can see that she was, she was wrong. I think up until then she always felt, really felt that I was in the wrong. And sort of from there, our relationship started to change and we start, I don't know, I don't know why really, um but it did. You know she, she did come back home for a few months before she got a permanent accommodation.

The big bossy sister

Suzanne herself delves into some of the patterns in her relationship with *Collette* during their teenage years. At school, in the home and after the birth of *Collette*'s son, Suzanne was 'domineering' and 'bossy' and positioned as the 'big' sister. This dated back to their girlhood:

> Suzanne: I was quite protective over her in school when she started. Um, I used to go and check that she was ok at lunchtime or you know, and let her sort of tag along with me. Um, that was it really and after school we'd just sort of go our own ways.

This extract shows how the *positioned* discourse can include elements of caring, responsibility and protectiveness *and* distancing. Part of the distancing can be attributed to the additional power bestowed on the sister positioned as the 'big' sister. This is in marked contrast with the *shifting positions* discourse where power oscillates between individuals rather than remaining firmly located with the same person over a long period of time. Suzanne evokes an era when she was in control, assigned to the mothering role and 'took over':

> Suzanne: I'd always been [the] domineering older sister, really really bossy. Always telling her what to do. My mum and dad were divorced so we was left on our: my mum used to work full-time, so we was, we was left on our own a lot when we was younger and *Collette* says that she feels that I was her second mum. I really took over the position of mum. I stuck, you know, I was the one who taught her how to do her shoe laces up and I, because I'm that way anyway and, I suppose, and being put in that situation, I did completely take over.

Suzanne's reference to 'being put in that situation' is similar to Phoebe's talk, discussed in section four of this chapter, about her becoming a minimother in order to help her mother who was raising a family single-handed.

One way that Suzanne's big sister positioning took form was by overseeing *Collette*'s mothering skills compounded by her allegiance to their own mother so that *Collette* had two women 'policing' her (Hey 1997: 58):

> Suzanne: I kind of really appreciate now how hard it was for her as well, you know, being, being that young, wanting to be a good mum, wanting to be, do everything right for her son and having these two, you know, me as a sister and her mum, completely taking over her life and saying like, do this for him, and do that, and I'm saying, you know, shouldn't you be giving him this to eat and shouldn't you be giving that.

A shift took place with *Collette*'s flight from the family household: 'I suppose when she left she made [...] she made a stand saying this is me'. This marked a change in their relationship. As she reflects on their past, Suzanne distinguishes between the personality element of the dynamic they were in and the structural context. She also muses implicitly on the effect of their changed circumstances on the relationship they enjoy as adults - one of friendship. Significant, for Suzanne, is the role of talk in their current rapport:

> Suzanne: [...] it seems the older that we get the more we talk about things and the more that we, and the closer we've become, the more we realise that we are[n't] what we see as youngsters, what we see in each other as youngsters wasn't really there, you know it was maybe the situation that we was living in.
> MM: Like can you think of an example then?
> Suzanne: Um, not really, no. I mean it, it's just...maybe the kind of person that she always thought I was, I'm not.
> MM: You, you mean like the, the domineering one or?
> Suzanne: Yeah, yeah. Yeah the relationship's taken on a completely different, um, you know, just a, a completely different, different aspect. I'm,

> I don't domineer her anymore, you know, I'm not that domineering sister anymore. I'm just a friend, you know.

Suzanne's trajectory, her shedding of her old bossy self, illustrates the way that it is possible to move out of the *positioned* discourse. Power itself differs in each discourse, fixed and hegemonic in the *positioned* discourse, fluid and shifting in the *shifting positions* discourse, and women can potentially leave one and enter another: in practice, however, this is not a given. Suzanne characterises the changing power relations between them in the past and the present in her use of the term *level*:

> Suzanne: we wasn't on the same level because I always felt that I was responsible for her, you know, she had to do what I said.

Describing their relationship in the present however she says 'we're really on the same level' and the shift from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse 'has made a more honest sort of an open relationship'. Furthermore, as adults, they have gone through a role reversal of the situation they experienced as teenagers when *Collette* was a mother at home creating havoc in the household by acting like a teenager and going out. The conflict stemmed from the responsibility for caring for the baby being off-loaded onto Suzanne and her mother.

As adults, they have a good relationship now, of *best friendship*, after turbulent teenage years:

> Suzanne: she knows I love her and think that she's really wonderful anyway no matter what she does... [...] it doesn't matter what she does in her life, whether, whether, it's the kind of thing that I would do or whether I really approve of it, I still love her and I'm always, we're always going to get on and sort of like each other even though we might not do exactly what the other thinks is right.

They enjoy an intimate relationship, they ask each other for advice about emotional and practical matters:

> Suzanne: We seem to be able to know really what's going on with the other person and what they really need and what they really want. [...] so we seem to take time out of our lives to be together. We seem to need to do that I think. Um pop up for a coffee [...] She is my best friend, yeah.

Roles reversed

Following their teen years which were dominated by the *positioned* discourse, in their current lives they have moved to a period marked by the *shifting positions* discourse.

Compared with the teen period when Suzanne was the free autonomous young woman, and *Collette* the mother with responsibilities, Suzanne is now the mother tied to the home and *Collette*, working outside the home, the more independent of the two. *Collette*, with an older child, is also the more experienced mother who provides advice to her older sister on child-rearing and education:

> Suzanne: I wasn't 100% sure about, you know um and then I was asking because she's got a son that's been through, you know. It, the roles reversed a little bit because she's got the elder son [...] You know, so I can, and I said to her, you know, what do you think, and she was really positive, very positive and very definite that I should keep Juliet [her daughter age 5] where she was and not bring her, sort of send her to school in this area, really.

> Suzanne: Really our whole roles have been reversed because when Tristan was young she was at home and I was out working and doing what I wanted to do and buying the clothes and now Tristan's older she's, I'm the one that's at home now and she's the one that's out at work and she's got her well sort of independence [laughter]. I mean she's working with my mum, so that's been quite fraught at times [clears throat] but um, in that respect, from our younger years, our roles have reversed. But I'm now the one that's at home and she goes to work and she's more independent than I am.

> Suzanne: whereas maybe, when we was younger she would come to me and say, oh Suzanne what shall I wear and what um, would you help me, you know, pick some clothes, would you do some make-up for me, can I wear this. Now there's been times when I've gone down to her and I've said, have you got anything I can wear, and, and um, you know, where she's done the fitness training, she's quite knowledgeable on that sort of score, so I could go to her and say, and like when she helped me out after I had Juliet and said, you know, start going to the gym, come with me, do this. Yeah.

Nevertheless the *positioned* discourse has not disappeared completely, as Suzanne is only too well aware of. When they talk about their men folk, *Collette* knows that Suzanne disapproves of her boyfriend. Suzanne comments wryly and with humour:

> Suzanne: I just don't think that he is right for her. Um but that's probably just my big sisterly bit coming out [laughs] I want the best for my little sister. I don't know.

Through the looking glass

Reflecting back, Suzanne pin-points a factor that kept them close - going through an emotional and difficult experience together:

> Suzanne: I was very involved with Tristan because of the fact that he lived with us I think, from a baby. That's what made, that's what made us, maybe it tore us apart in the beginning but it, it's since been one of the factors that has kept us close because we was all there

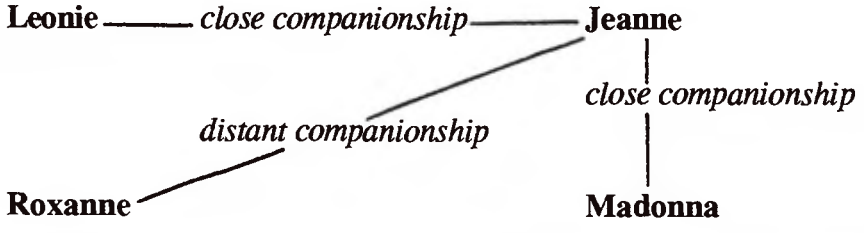
Furthermore, Suzanne notes how much she was influenced by her mother during the difficult period with *Collette*, taking on many of her views about mothering and caring for a baby. In addition, her mother used Suzanne as an intermediary in order to talk to *Collette* on her behalf when they were teenagers. Suzanne's perception has changed now that she, too, is a mother herself; she can see that the difficulties they went through owed less to their personalities and more to 'the situation that we was living in'. She also feels that her mother 'never encouraged us to be close'. She is determined not to let her mother repeat this setting against each of her own two daughters; she says, like Rowena, also the mother of two daughters, that she wants to avoid 'history repeating itself'. Like other women in the study, she talks critically of the role that mothers can play in distancing daughters from each other.

In the next section, I focus in more detail on the *positioned* discourse and its connection to positive and negative aspects of mothering through a case study of Jeanne's relationship with her three sisters.

3. Escape from Motherland: Jeanne

First, I present some background information about Jeanne before exploring the links between her notions of 'mothering' and 'being mothered', and the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. As the second child and daughter in a family of seven siblings, Jeanne, age 45, was both positioned and positioned herself as a 'big sister'. She relates to each sister in a different way: she has *close companionate* relationships with Leonie and Madonna and a tie of *distant companionship* with Roxanne (see Figure 3). She sees Madonna the most as they live in the same city.

Figure 3: Jeanne's relationships with her three sisters



Past and present

As a girl, Jeanne says that she was 'foul' to Leonie and resented her. Now she sees Leonie as a 'semi mother figure', a provider of stability in the family unlike their own mother. Her relationship with Roxanne is the most difficult in spite of the great affection she feels for her. There is a wide gulf between them dating back to their teenage years when Jeanne took advantage of her age to patronise Roxanne. The rift occurred when Roxanne returned from college: 'we fell out, she wasn't prepared to listen to my clap-trap'. Jeanne admits that nowadays she 'feels threatened by her dynamism and intellect'. Roxanne's narrative in conjunction with Jeanne's provide an 'allied account' of their tie: they agree on its history. This information gives a context for understanding Jeanne's comments; however, I am not examining their relationship in detail.

Jeanne and Roxanne have little contact: they do not send each other birthday cards and only see each other at 'family dos'. Madonna is the one with whom she is closest: they are more like equals and friends and see each other more regularly (mostly with Thomas, Jeanne's new partner, an arrangement with which Jeanne is unhappy). She has several girlfriends. When she got divorced she only told her sisters after the event.

Jeanne talked about her own subjectivity in detail, about not wanting to mother her sisters or be mothered by them, about the way that she creates distance and sets boundaries between them and herself and how she sees this as slightly negative, feeling guilty about this process. My interpretation of Jeanne is that she is happy with her relationships with Leonie and Madonna, although she would prefer a more independent tie with Madonna. She is less happy with her relationship with Roxanne. She talked in a very reflective manner, with very little prompting, in a questioning monologue.

In relation to all her concerns about 'mothering' and 'being mothered' she mentioned her son Dylan (13), whom she noted ironically is the only person she wants to mother, though at his age, he is not very keen on being mothered. Jeanne talked about her mother, who required the daughters to mother her, like other women in the study who had to mother their mothers (for example Beth, see Chapter IV, section 5; and Phoebe, see section 4 in this chapter). Jeanne's narrative suggests that she is grappling with several 'subject positions' that feel more or less un/comfortable.

Babies and bottles

Jeanne's narrative presents a depth analysis of feminine subjectivity struggling with and resisting positive and negative aspects of 'mothering' contained in the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. However, the focus of this section is not on any one of her

relationships with her three sisters in detail: instead, it highlights the way that she returns to the idea of 'mothering' as it is particularly relevant for understanding the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. Jeanne's emphasis on 'mothering' and 'being mothered' sheds light on both discourses: she seems to want neither. One notion of mothering is 'always being there', something that she associates with Leonie, the eldest, and the opposite of what their mother provided; and with her relationship with her son. Of Leonie, who mothered them considerably when they were children and who was positioned as a minimother, she says:

> Jeanne: ...she's not a mother figure because that's to er give her too much responsibility but she's um, she provides that, that certain sort of stability, um to our family which I don't think our mother was able to do. So I see her as, um very independent, very caring, very together sort of person who makes very few demands of me, she does make some but not many, um, but who is always there for me, in the way that a mother would be really.

In a sense both Leonie and Madonna in their structural location within their natal family (Parkin 1997), as eldest and youngest provide Jeanne with examples of what she is attempting to avoid in her current relationships with them - examples of the 'baby' sister position on the one hand, and the 'big' minimother position on the other. Jeanne explains:

> Jeanne: Madonna, when she was younger was just this adored little girl, and she was adored. Because we all had the chance really to, to practice all those [laughter] all those dreadful mothering skills that we'd been witnessing [laughter]!!! And from that early age really, you know, we were going to be, um, better at it. We were all going to be better at it um than our mother had been.

Jeanne is very explicit about not wanting to be either 'mothered' by her sisters as Madonna was or mother them in turn, as Leonie did:

> Jeanne: I know that I hold back with certain things and it's to do with this, um, the fact it, it's to do with the way that we were mothered and that our mother has required us to mother her um and has not been that sort of emotional support that, that you should have. And as I say, I'm exploring at the moment the fact that I, I think that I don't press Madonna for instance over certain things that I know are worrying her. Um, or tell her certain things that are worrying me because um, I think on the surface, it's because I don't want to burden her, because that isn't her role, I don't want to force her into the role of mother for me, but more worryingly for me, I think I also keep some distance because I don't want them to force me into the role of mother for them.

> Jeanne: I certainly don't want to force them into the role of mothering me, I know I don't want that. Um, but more interestingly, something that's come out recently is that I think I don't want them to put me in that role either. I don't want, want to mother them because um, because I, I feel I, I don't know, I, I think because I feel so strongly that I don't want to mother people except the person that I am a mother to, which is my son, who incidentally [laughter] wants nothing to do with me because he's 13 [laughter]!

Another negative association with 'mothering' for Jeanne stems from her difficult relationship with Roxanne whom she patronised when Roxanne was a teenager: in this sense she negatively positioned herself as a mother. Jeanne is lucid and eloquent about the power relations between them from which their relationship has never recovered:

> Jeanne: I was insufferably patronising to her and, and just adopted this sort of role of mother but it was the role that my mother played with her but I sort of used the fact that I was closer to her than my mother to impose exactly the same sort of things on her as my mother was trying to do. Oh, horrible. And I think um, I mean I don't know, I think those years possible irretrievably damaged that relationship really and she went off to college and we have never been close. You know, there were nights when she was still at home and I was home from college or before I'd gone off to college even when we would lay in bed and talk and there was no basis for talking as equals. Um I, I was just patronising and dictating to her and telling her how to live her life and it must have been awful for her. She must have hated me [laughter]!

Jeanne's explanation for locating herself in the *positioned* discourse as big patronising sister when she was younger, has to do with not wanting Roxanne to repeat some of her own mistakes; as a result, however, Jeanne 'tried to control her', Roxanne rebelled, and they became distant which Jeanne feels sad about.

Supermother

A further negative connotation that 'mothering' has for Jeanne is its link with experiencing the painful emotions of significant others, in this case, her sisters. She contrasts this with her female friendships where some degree of detachment for her enables her to 'switch' off in a way that she cannot do with her sisters:

> Jeanne: I don't want to burden and worry them. To go back to it, I think something that's coming out um in my life is that, that, that the possibility that if I expect that from them, they might perhaps expect the same from me and I don't know whether I have it to give. And yet, it's there for friends because er I can switch off from friends. I mean, I can care very deeply for them and their pain and their anxiety. It is, it is great, I mean I can feel it greatly but, but it never brings me down. I'm always separate from it.

> Whereas my sisters' pain I am not separate from it, so their pain is my pain to a greater or lesser extent.

Jeanne's understanding of 'mothering' is linked to ideas of caring and protectiveness expressed by not burdening others with personal emotional troubles: it is the idea of a one-way relationship where one person is providing all the emotional support for another. She says:

> Jeanne: with women friends, only one or two, but with one or two I would just um .... tell them exactly what my misery was and I find that very hard to do with my sisters if there is a misery. I find that very hard to do with my sisters and I don't think it's, I don't think it's protecting me that, I think it starts off as protecting them, that if I tell them, I'm saying to you, I'm saying to them, give me all the support. See, I have this ideal notion of a mother and it is, that, that is the person who I would have done that with as a younger person and would still be able to do it.

Jeanne's concept of the 'ideal mother' consists of a woman who could and can deliver total support and nurturing - supermother. The difficulty is that this 'ideal mother' rarely exists in this form[2]. One interpretation of Jeanne's ideal is that it stems from its absence in her early years, from what she terms her mother's inadequate mothering. Jeanne's ideal of supermother explains her desire to move away from the *positioned* discourse in her relationships with her sisters. The one exception is her tie with Roxanne: Jeanne and Roxanne remain locked in a situation determined by past conflict which positioned Jeanne as 'big' and Roxanne as 'little' sister. Roxanne has rebelled against this positioning and Jeanne admits not having the time, confidence or energy to address and repair this tie in order to transform it. Jeanne remarks about the research process that 'it is in talking that you see things more clearly': this is interesting as she does not want to talk with Roxanne in order to 'see' or sort out their relationship.

Nevertheless, Jeanne is aware of the issues and options open to her. The myth of the 'ideal mother' has a strong hold on her which she comments on wryly: 'I still chase the goal of the perfect relationship and er still try and be the perfect mother and, you know, superwoman really.' As a result, she maintains a certain amount of distance between herself and her sisters although in her relationship with Madonna, who makes few demands of her, in her words, they do hug and cry together. Jeanne's tie with Madonna contains an element of 'equality' and *shifting positions* which marks it out from her ties with her other two sisters.

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2 See Mauthner, N. (1994) for examples of the oppressiveness of such notions in postnatal depression.

It seems that this is her only sister relationship where there is a degree of intimacy. And yet she is puzzled by the element of distance that she experiences there, too:

> Jeanne: I have this feeling that it is much stronger and um and more approaching whatever a good relationship is but still, there is distance between us which um, would not be there with say, my closest female friends. I do still hold back and I feel that she does as well.

For Jeanne, distance has negative overtones, it is as if she cannot imagine the positive aspects of distance in what she calls 'a good relationship'. For her, distance is a mechanism for protecting herself from closeness and from her fear of 'not coping' if she gets too stuck in: 'I think that's still where the distance comes, that, that I think that, if I get in just too close, I won't be able to cope'. Implicitly, she attributes a negative meaning to this position that she adopts. One reason could be that the whole notion of distance is something about which she feels very ambivalent: 'I do, I regret that, that I am so, that I do create a distance between myself and the people that I care for and I don't fully understand why I do it or how ....'. She does not have even a slightly positive reading of this distancing process. However, Edwards' (1993b) research on how mature women students integrated education with their family lives suggests the positive aspects, for some women, of keeping certain aspects of their lives separate. Her typology of connection, separation, and mixing connections and separations of education and family offers a positive reading of the process of 'cutting off' (Edwards 1993b:130) for women between their separate identities.

Mothering and sistering

How does this analysis of 'mothering', 'being mothered', the supermother ideal and the negative aspects of distance relate to the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses? In trying to answer this I want to look further at the *shifting positions* element of Jeanne's relationship with Madonna. Jeanne says 'I feel more like we are equals really'. One example of this equality between them is Madonna's ability to disagree with Jeanne in an assertive manner by telling her about issues, comments or phrases that she dislikes. Jeanne sees this is as a strength:

> Jeanne: on the one hand I felt awful because I felt that she was very justified in what she was saying and on the other hand I felt er very pleased really that she'd been able to say that because I think it's a, a breakthrough, I think it's a step forward for me

One interpretation of her term 'breakthrough' could be to do with moving out of the *positioned* discourse by having someone, Madonna, take her to task when Jeanne locates herself there. As a result of this, their relationship contains a whisper of *shifting positions*

although it would appear that for Jeanne, the fact they see each other as a threesome with her partner, and seldom at that, is something that she feels unhappy about.

Jeanne's narrative sheds light on the way that ideas of 'mothering' are embedded in and construct the *positioned* discourse. It also reveals the linguistic difficulties of defining 'sistering', a term introduced by Hazel, without drawing on notions of 'mothering' and 'being mothered'. In the next section, I examine further the *positioned* discourse in relation to Hazel and Phoebe's tie where it dominated their girlhood and adolescence. Only as adults have they been able to move out of this discourse and into the *shifting positions* discourse.

4. Rebel with a cause and Miss Goody Two Shoes: Hazel and Phoebe

Hazel (age 34) and Phoebe's (age 35) relationship illustrates in depth the move away from the *positioned* discourse to the *shifting positions* discourse. Whereas the *positioned* discourse recreates aspects of the mothering relationship, the *shifting positions* discourse encompasses movement and flux out of the 'big' and 'little' sister positions to a form of role reversal. Hazel and Phoebe's relationship exemplifies this dynamic. What is remarkable about their tie is their reflexivity about the changes that it has undergone: each reveals key events in their lives *and* simultaneously offers a detailed interpretation. The crucial change that occurred is the way that they shifted positions and agreed openly that Hazel is now Phoebe's 'big sister'.

Their understanding of the evolution of their relationship is based on two elements: first, the emotional impact of the changing structure of their natal family on their girlhoods, and second, the individual 'agentic' change (Maynard 1995:274) in which each of them engaged. For Phoebe, this change manifested itself in her becoming more 'self-preservatory' and less 'other-directed': for Hazel, it meant 'breaking out' of the mould in which she had been cast as the un-clever 'wild' girl and voicing her emotions to her mother and sister. The conceptual categories used to refer to these changes are the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses.

The sisters' versions of their relationship, produced in two separate interviews, form an 'allied' account (Song 1998): they feel the same way about their bond and their narratives match. Their 'allied account' was produced independently as confirmed by Hazel's comment regarding the process of accessing Phoebe to take part in the research:

> Hazel: I'll give Phoebe a ring and I shall explain to her and I'll say to her you know, actually what I'll say to her, I...I'm not telling you anything I've said because it's...you know, if you're going to do, it's got to come from you.

Their relationship appears to be one of *close companionship* yet on closer inspection resembles *best friendship*: although they do not have much in common and neither would describe the other as their best friend, they maintain regular contact, feel close to each other, and have a profound knowledge and understanding of each other. Their relationship has been influenced by a series of events: their up-bringing by their lone mother, the death of their step-father and then their half-sister *Denise*, the dissolution of Phoebe's friendship with her best friend, and Hazel's depression.

Girlhood

Girlhood was a time when the two sisters were extreme opposites. Phoebe was Miss Goody Two Shoes protecting her mother and mothering her younger siblings. Here, Phoebe's experience of mothering picks up where Jeanne's resistance to it left off. Hazel and their younger half-sister *Denise* were the rebellious ones, the 'bad girls' who their mother found difficult to manage. And Phoebe was the 'good girl'. Hazel says that she felt rejected by their self-employed mother who had little time for her. In young Phoebe's eyes, Hazel was the cause of 'a little bit of madness and chaos in the family home' through her 'irresponsible' behaviour - for example breaking things. The sisters' different personalities led Hazel to comment sarcastically:

> Hazel: Phoebe was always the clever one, Phoebe and Oliver [half-brother] were the academics. *Denise* and I were full of personality, it was almost like a consolation prize...this personality

Hazel and Phoebe were also opposites educationally: Phoebe was more assiduous and obedient at school than Hazel, who questioned authority. As teens they went to separate schools and had separate friends. They did little together which led their mother to describe them as 'not a close family'. Hazel reflects on her mother's assessment:

> Hazel: We weren't, in my mum's opinion we weren't close. Divide and conquer. If you tell a child constantly enough, you're not close to your brother, and there's this constant doubting 'well I feel close enough but you say I'm not'. And how close can you get? Unless you're walking round inside somebody else's skin you can only get so close and as brothers and sisters and mums and all that business, you are supposed to let go to a degree and go off, you're supposed to.

Hazel's language encompasses the power relations embedded in the institution of the family (Morgan 1996) when she talks about 'divide and conquer', a language of planning and strategy. Her emphasis on 'to let go' captures the distancing process in family ties about

which Jeanne felt so ambivalent - a practice which she recognised and yet felt negative and uncomfortable about. Phoebe's 'goodness' plagued Hazel into her twenties when she began to contemplate the possibility of change in the way that they were each located in the *positioned* discourse. The seeds of Hazel's changing subjectivity that emerged when she was in her thirties can be glimpsed here when she says:

> Hazel: I was standing out in the garden thinking, I'm never going to be as good as Phoebe, I was about 27, 28...and I'm never going to be as good as Phoebe. Said who, I mean looking back now, said who...? At the end of the day I sometimes wonder if people will be as good as me, you know [laughs]!

Minimothering

While they were growing up Phoebe was positioned as a minimother. When the girls' step-father died (Hazel was 7 and Phoebe 8), Phoebe's role as 'carer boss control' in Hazel's words increased: she was the responsible one, the good one, assisting her mother during a difficult time. Hazel resented the way that she was compared to Phoebe: her view is that 'the first person we compete with is our sister, then our mother'. Phoebe reveals her awareness of how Hazel must have experienced her during this period:

> Phoebe: [...] there were lots of things that I did, I mean, I mean I must have been nauseating, you know I never got into trouble, I would rush up and ask to rub the blackboard for you, Miss, at school.

Phoebe was positioned/constructed as the second mother and as a source of emotional support for their mother who ran a business single-handed and relied heavily on her. This caused considerable resentment in Hazel who hated being compared with Phoebe and disliked Phoebe's role of protector, controller. Phoebe was closer to their mother than Hazel who describes the different relationship they each had with her:

> Hazel: She's a lot closer to my mum than I am but I think that's probably because my mum has had to rely on her for emotional and practical support. [...] you had this 8 year-old child suddenly being trained as mum number two basically [...mainly in] emotional protection and care

Turning-points

The end of their girlhood, at the age of 7-9, was marked by a family trauma with the death of their step-father. Phoebe explains how she and Hazel were affected and how each reacted very differently:

> Phoebe: when our father died there were all sorts of confusing things happening which obviously she couldn't deal with, she couldn't cope with but her reaction to them was different to mine. We dealt with them in different ways and it caused conflict between us because I was always seen to be the goody two shoes who would be helpful and um, I mean poor old Hazel just ended up getting into trouble all the time. But obviously it was her way of, of crying out for some help and support.

As adults they have combed through the past and compared their interpretations of events that surrounded this bereavement concerning decisions that were made without their involvement. Phoebe says:

> Phoebe: when we've discussed this later on we both agree that obviously it was done for our best, in our best interest but we both feel that really we should have been much more part of the family scene

Another source of turmoil occurred with their half-sister *Denise*'s tragic death at 19 when Hazel and Phoebe were in their mid-twenties. Hazel described her death at length and for ethical reasons, details are not revealed here. This second bereavement profoundly influenced the sisters' relationship. Each of them reverted to type and adopted their familiar roles according to Hazel: 'that was it, it was...everyone rallied to protect mum. So then...Phoebe became the child again that was in control, I became the child again that was...rebelling'. Yet at the same time, after years of confrontation and resentment, the sisters rallied together in the aftermath of *Denise*'s death:

> Hazel: Phoebe and I were actually now dealing with...we were actually dealing with something together for the first time. We both had control because my mum had none, she was grief stricken and she didn't have any control so we actually united; at that point I would say, was the first time we dealt with a situation as a team as opposed to fighting against it.

Denise's death provoked a shift in their relationship. It indicated the early signs of the end of the dominance of the *positioned* discourse which had previously characterised their tie. This discourse was only to be fully dislodged when the sisters reached their thirties.

Piggy in the middle

In her recollection of the past, Phoebe sees herself as having been positioned as intermediary between her mother and Hazel. Growing up as a minimother, mothering both her siblings and her mother, Phoebe tended to back her mother in situations of conflict. She contrasts the way that she interpreted events as a girl and daughter in the past and as an adult mother in the present in her narrative of one of her mother's suicide attempts:

> Phoebe: Hazel used to [sighs], again, used to wreak havoc by, I don't know, just rushing about madly and shouting and, and just generally attention seeking, um and because I wasn't like that, it caused conflict between us and I don't know if I, I understood at the time why she was doing it but I, I understood why she was behaving that way but I didn't think it was appropriate because I could understand my mum's point of view. So I was constantly torn between what Hazel was doing, why Hazel was doing it and then on the other hand, the reaction that it was having on my mother and therefore I was, I was very much torn between the two of them and rightly or wrongly, I tended to want to protect my mother more. Which is quite strange really because when you think about it, [it] should be your mother protecting you. Now as a mother I can see that, but at the time, I didn't see, I just saw Hazel as being a nuisance and a pest and inconsiderate. I didn't see her as being thoughtful and therefore I, I became angry with her to try and protect my mum, which is quite strange.

Phoebe reflects on the stressful situation she was put in as this intermediary between mother and sister and the way her loyalty was tested in a way that she did not seek out:

> Phoebe: I think one of the nice things that's happened, that's a huge relief to me is that my mum and Hazel have come to understand one another and I think that was, looking back, that was one of the difficulties I had, because I was constantly this piggy in the middle. My mum would make comments about how Hazel was behaving, Hazel would make comments about how my mum had reacted to something and I was almost, well I was torn between my allegiances, you know there certainly were times when I wanted to say to my mum butt out, that's Hazel's decision. On the other hand there would be times when I'd say, well yes mummy you're quite right she has done such, and, and it was always this, I, and again I, I mean that was very destructive for the relationship that Hazel and I had because she was, well, aware of that happening

Changing relationships and subjectivities

What is interesting about the sisters' narratives is their interpretation of the past in the light of two elements: the life events and circumstances of their girlhood influenced by bereavement, and their changing subjectivities in reaction to these. Both these elements, what I have termed 'changing relationships' and 'changing subjectivities', structure their understanding of their ties in the past and the present. Phoebe's snapshot of their adolescence summarises the intersection of unexpected life events with the more common features of femininity:

> Phoebe: there was a lot happening really for us to deal with, as well as just the basic things as having greasy hair and spots and boyfriends who don't love you anymore and things like that [laughter] [...] because of the

> circumstances of the way our lives were, added pressures and strains were put on us

Their teenage years coincided with a time of upheaval marked by parental and sibling bereavement and attempted suicide. Hazel's version of the fragility of the family and her mother's vulnerability and mental ill-health is summed up by: 'it was all circumstantial not self...'.

This context of changing relationships and especially the *positioned* discourse impinged on the sisters' individual subjectivities. When Phoebe looks back at her girlhood critically, she observes the way that she was positioned as 'good Phoebe': almost trapped within that discourse she notes how difficult it was for her gradually 'changing subjectivity' to emerge:

> Phoebe: At the time I revelled in it, I'm ashamed to say, it was my glory, I was good Phoebe. Everyone told me how wonderful I was all the time and for years and years and years, I was good Phoebe, to the point that even if I wanted to not be good I couldn't because I'd be letting everybody down. I couldn't actually be me.

Significantly, she talks about her own pleasure and investment in the *positioned* discourse in a way that is reminiscent of Hollway's (1989) account of men and women who cling to harmful discourses which they feel ambivalent about shedding or relinquishing. Phoebe traces her 'changing subjectivity' in an analytical and reflexive manner:

> Phoebe: I was almost stuck in this groove but, but certainly for those years, I did, you know, I realise now that I, it was a role I quite happily got myself into. I mean, I enjoyed being good, and I do now, I don't, excuse me, I'm not given to being horrible to people um it, it's, I get a buzz out of being nice, I mean if I do somebody a good turn it it makes me feel good. I mean I think that's, I recognise that in myself. But um it was quite difficult because there were some very very difficult times when my mum had, um, a couple a nervous breakdowns between, in our sort of early, middle teens and um basically I mothered her, it, that's how I, how I see it. [...] I ended up protecting her [...]

Eventually Phoebe's halo faded, as she recounts herself:

> Phoebe: I've certainly said to my mum and I, I reiterate it over and over again, is that I know I have faults, I mean I'm. As a young person I wandered around with my shining halo and I know that it's fallen off, you know, I don't, I don't walk about with a halo.

Unlike Jeanne, who rejects with vehemence any attempts by her sisters to mother her and who, herself, is ill at ease with the activity of 'mothering' except with her son, here Phoebe was placed by circumstances in a position where she ended up caring for her mother.

Breaking out

As Phoebe's halo faded and she moved out of the *positioned* discourse, similarly Hazel, too, broke out of that same discourse where she had been positioned as the 'little sister'. Hazel's 'breaking out' happened in several stages: initially, it followed a period of depression in her thirties when she was ill. After her recovery she voiced her feelings of resentment to her mother and sister. The catalyst of her 'breaking out' was a family row, and its consequence, a move for her relationship with Phoebe into the *shifting positions* discourse. First, I document the conflict; secondly, the emotions expressed; and thirdly, the effect in the form of a role reversal.

The scene of the row which sparked off the eventual role reversal was a family gathering. During an exchange between Hazel, her partner and Phoebe about a TV programme which Hazel's partner alleged that he had not been allowed to watch, Hazel flared up at him and soon the two sisters were in conflict. Hazel recalls the episode when her emotions of resentment were let loose:

> Hazel: it was this...big sister interference just once too often and it was just sort of...head swung round and, who bloody asked you whether you were joking or otherwise! Perhaps you should keep your sodding jokes to yourself...! And it was .....that was it! Once the gates opened it was...there's this big sister again, what the hell do you think you're doing, do you think I'm [in]capable of solving a relationship problem, oh well you deal with it Phoebe, you've always dealt with my problems so aptly and I'll let you get on with it shall I? Shall I just sit in a chair and go comatose and then you can run my life for me?

Hazel's outburst was paramount for her in that it marked the moment when she set the record straight with her family about the way that they had perceived her - as not being clever - while she was growing up. Hazel says:

> Hazel: to actually have said to them about three, four years ago whenever this big row was, I'm not as thick as two short planks, you've labelled me all wrongly all my life, you don't know me at all and watch... and then you get this realisation, well, I don't know me that well, I don't know what I'm capable of or what I'm not

The forcefulness of Hazel's words corresponds in part to her decision to return to study following her early unhappy experience at school. Eventually, she said, she would like an 'emotional healing type of job be it sort of child psychology'.

Hazel's auto/biographical monologue traces the moment when her resentment reached its peak and she ruptured the patterns of the *positioned* discourse. The effect of this expression of emotions during conflict had far-reaching effect for the sisters' relationship. Hazel seized this moment to present her perspective of the relationship which, ultimately, led to a role reversal. She describes her shift from a position of silence to a more verbal mode and talks about the changing power relations when she uses the term 'control':

> Hazel: [you] go through life resenting everything Hazel um...that actually carried on up until about three years ago this...er...I know better than you sort of attitude and sort of, I suppose resenting it for long enough and keeping quiet about it long enough, there was an absolute almighty family row er....where I laid all my cards on the table and everyone stood there, sort of gob-smacked I suppose would describe it quite well...and I got a phone call and everything sort of reversed. Not where I have control and all the business for Phoebe but where Phoebe accepts that I am an autonomous person and I don't need her control and I don't need her standards and I don't need...she's constantly, as a child she was brought up and expected to help control the little ones.

Hazel's word 'autonomous' captures precisely what was absent in Roxanne and Madonna's flirtation with the *shifting positions* discourse (see Chapter VI, section 2): the inability, on the part of both of them, to see the other as an independent separate person. For Hazel and Phoebe, though, gradual recognition and acceptance of their differences and autonomy was to pave the way for the successful move of their tie from the *positioned* into the *shifting positions* discourse.

Hazel's narrative highlights the importance of silence and language, Smith's 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge' (Smith 1988 cited in Stanley and Wise 1990:34), the impact of trading silence for words, when she says: 'And I wouldn't speak to any of them, I thought...you, it's all been said...I don't love you any of the less because I've said it, in actual fact it's probably easier now because you've been told'. She reflects on the way that she changed her usual behaviour of remaining silent for a more outspoken stance: 'I'd given up smoking at the time as well which is actually probably why it all came out because normally I'd light a fag up and I'd think yep so what...you know, button it and hold it'. Her awareness of the appropriateness of silence in specific situations reveals the level of reflexivity displayed in her narrative. I return to this in the final section of the chapter.

Hazel's definition of closeness, unlike her mother's, which is to do with contact and shared activities, is linked to monitoring emotions and judging appropriate silence:

> Hazel: people tend to think of closeness in a way of what you are able to say to somebody, I tend to think of closeness can sometimes be what you're not prepared to lay on them...like guilt trips or...you know, there's certain things you don't say to people because you're close, you know.

Hazel's narrative takes form through a language of emotions: she feels strongly that in a family it should be safe to say what you feel and desirable, even necessary, to withhold other elements, for example 'guilt trips'. Her outburst can be interpreted as a rebellion against a family pattern from their girlhood when Phoebe withheld her emotions from a desire to protect and mother their mother. While Hazel's depression was the catalyst for her breaking out of the 'little sister' position in which she had been cast in the *positioned* discourse, it also marked the start for Phoebe of a move away from her 'big sister' role of minimothering to a position of 'self-preservation'.

Self-preservation

Phoebe's changing subjectivity emerged in relation to specific events in her own life and Hazel's. At the time of Hazel's depression, Phoebe was involved in moving house, recovering from the dissolution of her tie with her best friend from childhood and supporting her husband through a difficult period of his own. During Hazel's illness she found herself pulling away slightly from Hazel's traumas from a desire to channel her energy in a different direction and protect herself:

> Phoebe: about that time [when Phoebe was moving house] Hazel was very very depressed and um I couldn't, I couldn't help her. I felt really awful, I mean I'd, I'd phone but I couldn't be there for her, it was um, it was almost as if at that point I'd just had enough of dealing with things and it was, and I felt totally, totally awful about it, um and it was from then on I suppose really, that I began to get less and less involved with the dramas, um it was almost I suppose, a protective thing for me. [...] I was just emotionally drained. [...] I just didn't want to be involved in any more hurt and pain. It wasn't my hurt and pain; it was her hurt and pain.

Jeanne (see above) also talked about the difficulty of feeling another's pain and her wish to distance herself from it. This period was a demanding one for Phoebe who managed it, according to her, without asking Hazel for much support. She recounted that she did keep in touch with Hazel, speaking to her, but kept herself at a distance in terms of both the events in Hazel's life - her depression - and in her own life. She did not rely on Hazel: 'I

used to phone her up in floods of tears but I tend to, I tend probably to keep things more to myself... at times like that I, I tend to keep my own counsel.'

This phase in Phoebe's life when she distanced herself from events in Hazel's life and became more self-orientated marked a break with the past and her role of mothering and caring for her siblings and mother. In her early thirties Phoebe redirected herself towards her 'family of procreation', or the family one creates (Parkin 1997:30):

> Phoebe: I had to start beginning to be a bit self-preservatory for my own, well not sanity, I mean that's too dire but, but for my own sense of well-being. I had to begin to focus on what was happening in my young family, my children, my husband, my home and to the exclusion at times of them and certainly, even, you know, with respect to, you know, minor crises

Part of Phoebe's changing subjectivity involved her growing awareness of her capacities and acceptance of her limitations:

> Phoebe: I think I've actually begun to like myself again lately and to realise that I know, you know, I have limitations and there is, there is a point at which I can give no more and I've begun to realise that there's no shame in that...

Phoebe's detailed account of this process of pulling away and distancing from Hazel reflects the difficulties that she experienced in moving out of her location in the *positioned* discourse.

During Hazel's depression, her brother and mother stepped in rather than Phoebe, marking a break with the past. However, Phoebe found this process complex and she uses the term 'betrayal' to describe her emotions at this time:

> Phoebe: it's as if I've put the shutters down and, and that's what I meant about being, betraying Hazel at a time when perhaps she did, could have done with a bit more support from me. I mean, I think she was, I think she was alright and I think probably she was so depressed she didn't notice I didn't go, at least that's what I'm hoping.

Phoebe's narrative of this distancing process is very much her own story rather than a joint account produced by both sisters together. The following extract shows the importance of the presence or absence of language in terms of developing knowledge, especially in producing an 'allied' account: here Phoebe *has* the knowledge, only she has not exchanged it or compared it with Hazel's version:

> MM: And so how did that affect your relationship with Hazel if you were sort of withdrawing a little bit?
> Phoebe: I don't know, I don't know because on, we don't really we haven't really discussed that period in very much detail because I, I still find it, I mean there were all sorts of things happening in my life as well as hers, so it's not a period I'm quite ready to get too deep into about with her. Um.

Phoebe's words also show where biography - the story of the other and of the relationship - ends and autobiography - the life history of the self - begins, as well as how enmeshed and separate they are. It is Phoebe's wish to secure her privacy that stands out here: in a sense, Phoebe acknowledges her changing subjectivity but is not yet willing to go into the finer details of it with her sister.

Role reversal

Hazel and Phoebe's awareness of the circumstances of their girlhood and teenage years extends to their heightened reflexivity about their relationship in the present (though not necessarily every stage of the past, as illustrated above). This is reflected in Phoebe's words: 'I think now that we're actually all of us able to basically get on with our lives, it's given us time to calm down and reflect on, on what's gone on.' In their early thirties, the big argument between them led to a turn-about when they decided almost 'officially' to swap roles and 'shift positions'. From being positioned as minimother regarding her own mother and her siblings, Phoebe shed her 'big sister' role and shifted positions with Hazel. Phoebe says:

> Phoebe: we've decided this year that she's going to be my big sister for a little, why? Because I, I find the sense of responsibility to her, it's just been a bit overwhelming [laughter] so we've swapped roles for a little while [laughter]

And Hazel corroborates this when she says:

> Hazel: this birthday I got a birthday card from my 'little sister', not physically or age wise but...sort of..

An early instance of *shifting positions* between them took place at school when Hazel, age 12, acted the 'big sister' part in order to protect Phoebe, age 13, from a girl who was bullying her.

Phoebe describes the process that the two of them went through to make explicit their decision for Hazel to be her 'big sister'. This process seems to be about changing

subjectivity: one example Phoebe gives is of the way that Hazel is able to take on board criticism more easily than she is. The significant aspect of this process of reflexivity between the sisters is emotion and language - feelings and verbalising them. Following the particular type of contact between them in their twenties with phone calls and encounters in moments of crisis, in their thirties they have opted for a different strategy. In their early twenties they went through a phase where Hazel rang at all hours and Phoebe listened to her:

> Phoebe: I must have been about 21, something like that, and she'd phone me up at, there was this period, it sort of seemed to go on for months, at 4 o'clock in the morning, the telephone would ring and it would be Hazel in floods of tears, needing to talk. Or I'd have to dive up there. My mum, I know, many occasions, used to jump in the car and go up there and just rescue whatever emotional crisis was happening and there was all that happening and so we were always there for each other. [...] I wouldn't have not have done it. I mean she was my sister and she needed to talk and um, I mean if anyone was to put her down and, I know the same happened from her point of view, if anyone were to make a personal attack on me, um, we would defend one another, it was, it was really quite interesting [...] she was very very loyal to me

In their thirties, both sisters began to question the *positioned* discourse and how it located each of them regarding each other and their mother. Hazel recounts a conversation with Phoebe when Phoebe felt upset about a row that she (Phoebe) had had with her mother:

> Hazel: I mean she [Phoebe] actually said in the end, she said, I've never actually grown up have I, I've always been...too busy being *big sister* to actually do the rest, and I said: well, it's not so much that, your biggest problem is... and I think it's a lot of families' failing, that you think that the love that we all have is so fragile, you think you can't have the row, you can't have the blazing argument, you musn't say that to mummy, she might get upset, how could you say that to each other, you know, there was all this...all those things

Hazel, too, questioned the way that Phoebe was affected by the *positioned* discourse and in turn assumed 'big sister' responsibility by telling Phoebe to live her own life:

> Hazel: although I resent the responsibility not being shared, I resent her having had the burden of it all whereas it was always taken that I just wanted the responsibility. But when we actually had this big row and we did get talking and I actually said look, it's like this...you're 33 now, or whatever she was at the time, you have to live your life

A large part of the struggle for both sisters to move out of the *positioned* discourse related to their relationship with their mother: for Phoebe, it was her mothering of her, and for Hazel, it was being compared to Phoebe and perceived in a negative light. Part of Hazel's transformation into 'big sister' entailed supporting Phoebe's recasting of her tie with her mother: in effect, Hazel helped Phoebe to look at her relationship with her mother in a new light. Hazel was instrumental in backing Phoebe's attempts to break away from their mother in order to 'live her own life'. Hazel is very dismissive in a way of Phoebe's lack of perspective and knowledge of their mother, owing to the type of relationship that she had with her. Hazel's disapprobation is expressed forcefully when she says: 'I actually looked at Phoebe and said...oh, you don't know her as well as you think you do! And she said, no, I don't. My sister was so busy looking after my mum, she never got to actually know her.' Hazel also encouraged Phoebe to do her own thing in relation to their mother:

> Hazel: the more assertive you are in your ability to make a decision and carry it through, the more ready she [mother] is to accept you as a fully grown person.

Hazel's relationship with Phoebe is complex. Regarding their current lives, Hazel urges her to free herself from her mother's hold and be her own person. Regarding their past, she feels resentful of all the responsibility and power - Hazel uses the term 'control' - bestowed on Phoebe as minimother. To Hazel's consternation, Phoebe did not aspire to be located in the *positioned* discourse and as the holder of so much power, she was always rendering Hazel invisible and positioning her as incompetent. While Phoebe confesses that she would have been happy to share it, Hazel however did not necessarily want to share it - she just thought it was unfair for Phoebe to 'have the burden' of responsibility. Phoebe had not considered this: for Hazel, a main concern was that Phoebe could not live her own life. Here the importance of talking emerges as a form of knowledge. Hazel describes the changing dynamic between them in relation to their shifting power positions through the theme of their mother's will which captures all of Hazel's resentment. Hazel says:

> Hazel: she could now say I wasn't a very good sister, I let you...I mean, she did let me down. I mean, there's no two ways about it, if you get someone into trouble deliberately and stand back and hahaha, then yes, you've let them down. But I've been sort of pointing out to her, what makes you think that I was that bloody weak that whatever you could do would actually affect me so horribly! I mean, what makes you think you had that much power! And having said all that, she doesn't feel as powerful any more and I think she's quite relieved [...] She actually phoned up, she said...oh, the will's in a brown envelope under the...and I got a bit more information of...I said, I'm not bloody bothered where the will is anymore to be honest with you! It was just a point that I wanted to make - you always had the control, you always had the responsibility. She said...I never wanted it. I said, I

> never wanted you to have it. She said...but I wouldn't have minded sharing it with you. I said, oh hang on a minute, I'm not saying I wanted it, I'm just saying I didn't think it was right that you had it! She said, I never thought of it like that. I never thought you thought mummy is putting too much on Phoebe. I said, of course she was, you never ever lived your own life!

A shift seems to have occurred in the triangle between the sisters and their mother, who is no longer the one doing the 'manipulating' to use Hazel's word:

> Hazel: And Phoebe went oh...I've been going through life thinking I had to do all the changing. I said for Christ sake Phoebe, manipulate! She does [laughs]! And it was and now it's a lot healthier.

This comment occurred in the context of a situation where Hazel had been loving to their mother, after Phoebe had just had an argument with their mother - in a sense, the issue is about Phoebe realising that she does not always have to protect and manage their mother's feelings. Regarding this issue of managing the feelings of significant others, Hazel relates her new approach, displaying in the process elements of her changing subjectivity when she says:

> Hazel: I actually can make myself not feel awful because somebody else is having a bad time in life, it's not my job to make them happy. That's their job and my mum feels that it's everybody's job to make everybody happy.

Companions or best friends?

Tracing the transitions in Hazel and Phoebe's relationship from their early years marked by the *positioned* discourse to their current lives where they have moved into the *shifting positions* discourse reveals a change in the type of tie they have. Their bond has evolved from *distant companionship* in their teens to a form of *best friendship* in womanhood. Phoebe explains the costs of caring for her mother and 'managing' her mother's emotions:

> Phoebe: we missed out on being able to be good friends and happy together: Hazel and I and myself, because we were always or I certainly was always so busy trying to keep mummy sane and happy and as worry-free as possible.

Phoebe reflects on the deep bond that exists between her and Hazel in spite of the conflict and distance which they have experienced. Theirs is a relationship with elements of both *close companionship* and *best friendship*. Phoebe says:

> Phoebe: from quite an early age Hazel learnt to to um dislike me really for just the way I was. And I disliked her because she was, she didn't achieve,

and because she was a nuisance and because she caused chaos and it, it was just much like that throughout her childhood and yet all the time even, I mean it sounds awful saying all this but, all the time underneath all that there was this togetherness, there was this, it didn't matter what each of us did, we'd always love each other. It was always there, it didn't need to be said, I mean we say it a lot now as we've got older because it's important to say these things but obviously as children you don't, you don't understand the necessity to say all these things.

The *best friendship* element is summarised in Phoebe's statement: 'if she picked up the phone I'd have been there for her, it was that sort of relationship', which was the case when they were in their twenties.

Hazel's loyalty for Phoebe is matched by Phoebe's appreciation for Hazel. Phoebe says:

Phoebe: I think as a result of the life we've had, I mean she is just the most incredible person, and I'm just so proud of her and hopefully she likes me a little bit now, you know er [laughter]!

Phoebe describes the element of *best friendship* in their bond:

Phoebe: Hazel and I love each other but we don't have a lot in common. [...] Hazel and I although we're as different as chalk and cheese in many many respects we have a, a more deep seated affection for each other [...]

Although they do not have a lot in common, their bond is an intimate one - Phoebe has more in common with her friends. Phoebe continues her description of her emotions for Hazel:

Phoebe: I love her quite unconditionally, I love her for exactly who she is. I don't, I wouldn't, I wouldn't change her and I think that's the nice thing, that we've both come to, as we've got older that probably, we were, certainly I would have loved to have changed her. I'd loved to have swapped her at times [laughter] but I certainly would have loved to have changed her! I found her incredibly embarrassing when I was younger because she was so loud mouthed and so cocky and so, and I wasn't like that at all. But I mean, I wouldn't change her now, I mean like, she's just very nice [laughter]. But this has all come about lately. That's what I meant when I said earlier it's difficult, it's difficult to look back and remember how things were and how I used to feel about things because my attitude towards my sister has changed so much um. I've begun, I suppose what I've begun to do is look at her as a person and not take on board quite so much what other people are telling me about her i.e. my mum and just look at her for who I think she is. Make my own decisions about her and my own, come to my own conclusions about her.

Phoebe reflects on how their relationship has evolved: she contrasts the past with the present and the change that occurred when she says, 'But this has all come about lately'.

In their thirties they have come to a period of acceptance of each other, enjoyment and appreciation, as Phoebe demonstrates:

> Phoebe: it's a sort of period of acceptance now that's come together for both of us, and therefore it's nice because when we are together it's, it is much more relaxed. She hasn't got to try and be me and I haven't got to try and be her. We haven't got to alter each other in any way, we can just be together and enjoy the time that we have together for, for who we are. That's just about it [laughter]!

Phoebe talked about her relationship with Hazel as always changing. They have reached a stage where they understand each other, listen to each other, recognise their differences and are more ready to accept them. They say their relationship is calmer now than during the turmoil of their girlhoods. They have a strong sense of connection or togetherness which always existed between them in spite of conflict and painful emotions. The way that Phoebe and Hazel have come to understand their past is through reflecting on experience, including their emotions, and then living their current lives with greater reflexivity or awareness than in the past. Part of this understanding coincides with their move out of the *positioned* discourse and their experiment with a role reversal in the *shifting positions* discourse. I want to suggest that the transition of their tie from its characterisation by one discourse to the other has occurred through their talk or the role of language, and their experience of their emotions.

Producing knowledge from emotions

Hazel and Phoebe's narratives reflect the role of language and listening in producing knowledge. Phoebe considers the role of talk and of experience or living:

> Phoebe: so much has happened in our family that we are able to talk, sometimes we talk too much. I think sometimes, sometimes we just don't get on with it, if you see what I mean, we spend far too much time being reflective and um discussing the issues but on the other hand I can see the huge benefits because I think now, um, it does mean that if we do have a grievance, it might take us a little while to get to that point, but we can actually discuss it, um, and see the other person's point of view. We, I think, I think we've learnt to listen to each other, isn't it, that's the thing, isn't it, it's, rather than talking, it's actually learning to listen to each other and to actually take on board the fact that what the other person is saying might not

necessarily be right or wrong but it is their point of view, it is, it's valid to them.

An important and recent part of the sisters' talk is their ability, as Phoebe says, to air and listen to grievances. As Phoebe recounts the past, she draws the researcher into her mode of talking and analysing relationships:

> Phoebe: it's actually quite strange in some way to um go back over stuff that's gone on in the past because of late, i.e. the last year or two um it's been in the box and the lid's been closing on it and it's quite strange to have it peeking out again, so, um, if you could just counsel me out of this now so I can get on with the rest of my day, [laughter]! No, I'll be fine.

Her evocative metaphor of the closed box being opened up during the interview evokes Paul D's anguish when he took the rusty lid off 'that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be' and began to lay bare his past to Sethe in Toni Morrison's (1987:72) *Beloved*. This process of recalling the past in a self-critical manner is difficult and upsetting for Phoebe. She says:

> Phoebe: I've tried to move on from that now because I need to function and get on with my day to day existence.

Hazel's description of her experience of understanding her past is similarly graphic. She compares the process to that of reassembling jigsaw pieces. She says:

> Hazel: I actually sort of took all the pieces while I was down and laid them all out on the carpet and put them all back together where they were supposed to be in the first place...and then you start realising that, that shouldn't have been there in the first place, it should have been...like a puzzle.
> MM: So how did you do all that then, how did you...?
> Hazel: Painfully [laughs], painfully! I looked at them, I looked at me, I looked at how another...always how another person would see it, how a fly on the wall would see it and then

The process of analysing her life has been a drawn-out one, which she carried out prior to the interview. Hazel says:

> Hazel: I've had all these conversations with myself, I've actually sat down and...there's...it would only bother me like, if suddenly, like I said to you earlier, some people must have realisations in a conversation like this, I'm not going to have any because my realisation's going to be a very slow and gradual one because I have to do all the analysis first [...]. I have to work to understand me and life and how I fit in

Hazel displays her self-knowledge of her skills and insights into her past, including her depression:

> Hazel: like I suppose that's why I'm analytical: if I know why I'm down then I don't mind being depressed. Because I can solve something which will lift the depression and Phoebe's actually...I think sort of taken a lot of that on board.

She reflects on changes in Phoebe:

> Hazel: Phoebe was always trying to please whereas now she's not as much, well she is, but she's trying to please herself a bit more.

One of the main ways in which Hazel has gained her knowledge about her life including her relationship with her sister is through emotions and especially by reflecting on how emotions can be tamed and 'managed'. She says:

> Hazel: parenting is for life and so is daughtering or and so is sistering. It is for life, it is one of the relationships...because it's for life, as well, it's a lot more stressful at times, isn't it, because if a friend gets on your nerves, you can ignore them for a couple of weeks, you know. But if you've got a sister that's got on your nerves and you ignore them for a couple of weeks, there's a little bit of guilt attached to that as well. But my family and I think most families don't actually sit it and look...I think they sit and look at their physical appearance, am I getting spotty or over weight or...but they don't look at their emotional development...people don't consider emotional development, they only consider emotion. And you can develop it and you can train it and you can actually work with it and you can actually...work with it, you can actually, there are things that will trigger off emotions in your life that you can learn to avoid.

Hazel's wisdom about emotions and how to harness them contrasts with the more disruptive impact of unresolved emotions in Madonna and Roxanne's relationship examined in the previous chapter.

Hazel's direct language and comments on relationships are embedded in emotions of sadness and joy:

> Hazel: it isn't as fragile, because we are close, because we can have all the ups and downs we like and it is still going to be strong enough to take the lot and it's... Basically what I said to Phoebe, don't be frightened of...life, of this love, of this family...don't be intimidated by it, use it, grow in it...and she went...yes, I suppose you're right [laughs]! Well I might be, I don't

> know [laughs]! Could be totally wrong and we'll all sort of go down the pan together but...it just seems more sensible not to be frightened of family love. I mean, Christ it shouldn't be a burden, it should be...where you can go for a release and that, and I mean it just gets better and better, doesn't it? I mean the more you work it out, the more you understand it, it's like a computer if you don't know how to work it you're not going to get much use out of it but if you sit down and read the book and study it you will use it to its full and I think relationships should be like that.

Hazel reflects with humour on the circumstances of her agreeing to take part in the study and how she might have said no. Her reference point is emotions:

> Hazel: I'd have said no if I'd still been going through the traumas of it all, because I think you're always...life's traumatic full stop. But I think I'd have probably have said, oh yes it will be a very emotional...I'll have to have a box of tissues...

Hazel's astute grasp of the role of emotions in producing knowledge is expressed in this extract which magnificently shows how power and emotions are entwined:

> Hazel: I think that females, and this is general, don't like to take control of their relationships and I think the first time you realise that, is with a sister because your mum definitely had the control when you're young, mum has control. Soon as mum goes to pieces and hands control over to big sister, big sister is now...a threat. You're looked at in a better light, it's all....and it's all the things that things imply, isn't it? It's not necessarily what happens to people as a child or with their sisters or without their sisters, it's how they viewed and how they felt about it, it's feelings you're talking about, feelings

Here, Hazel describes the *positioned* discourse in its negative impact on their sister tie when growing up and the role of emotions as a catalyst for questioning that discourse.

Wising up

Phoebe's role as caring, 'big' and good older sister existed through her emotional protection and caring of their mother after the death of their father. Her mother in a sense made her into an ally. Hazel and Phoebe are close, best friends at heart despite the little they say that they have in common: they love and respect each other, and are there for each other. Phoebe broke up with her best friend, so perhaps the sisters are best friends in an unusual way - best friends from all their understanding and knowledge of each other.

Phoebe admitted that she took part for Hazel rather than for herself, as Hazel rarely asks her for much. She was reluctant to give up a portion of her free time and found it difficult to revisit the past. At the end of the interview, like other women in the study, she jokingly asked me to return for an hour every week for a year. Intrigued by this reference to counselling, I examine it further in the next section in relation to the production of knowledge. I explore how, similarly to the role of emotions, the process of reflexivity in counselling influences the production of knowledge.

5. Psyches talk: reflexivity and therapy

In the previous section I hinted at the process of the production of knowledge prior to the interview, in Hazel and Phoebe's private lives, through talk and emotions and the distressing aspect of raking up emotions and incidents from the past in the interview. Here I consider this process further - the way that knowledge is produced from reflexivity, in certain cases for some women in the context of counselling and therapy. While the three of us, Hazel, Phoebe and I, analysed their relationship during the interview, in large part they had analysed their tie in depth prior to the research process. Both had puzzled over their family and analysed their own relationship unlike other women in the study who had given it less thought or who first addressed it only during the interview. Hazel spoke in a monologue and Phoebe required little prompting. Phoebe's perception of events over the years had changed: her understanding in the present differs from her view of events at the time. Since their girlhoods their knowledge and understanding of each other have evolved and increased.

In addition to Phoebe's reference to counselling at the close of the interview when she compared me to a therapist and Hazel's reference to 'emotional development' and 'triggering off emotions' reminiscent of the language of counselling and therapy, three other women (S13, S26, S27) alluded to past experiences of counselling/therapy either explicitly or by making comparisons with the interview situation. Clare at the end of the interview said: 'you realise I'm using this as a therapy session don't you [...] it's been great, two hours of free therapy'. Two other women (S14, S17) were seeing a health professional at the time: one woman highlighted its importance for enabling her to make decisions regarding her employment situation as well as for helping her to find a language with which to reflect about her relationship with her sister. She drew links between her experience of counselling and her ease with talking during the interview:

> so the reason why I can ramble on and on without you asking the questions is because I've thought about all these things and I've talked about all these things, talked about you know relationships, family relationships. Well, I

> suppose I've developed that, the vocabulary of whatever, the vocabulary to talk about it...so I can happily talk about it.

The interview was an occasion for reminiscing and reflecting on parallels between her upbringing with her siblings and her family of procreation especially in relation to her children. She saw her experience of therapy as a useful way to attempt 'to break the cycle'. She reflected on her changing subjectivity, the elements - emotions and behaviour - that she was actively trying to modify as a mother in relation to her children in order to avoid repeating her own mother's approach with her and her sister. She said:

> I'm thinking and trying...although it's very hard actually, also because there are certain things that I have in me about how I react to things er...yes, I'm probably very much like my...yes...when I think of how my angry reactions to my children, I suppose it's then that I maybe...things in my mind actually spark off that, that's how my mother...that's how things were for us as children because my mother was...would have these massive angry outbursts.

Counselling, only hinted at by Hazel and Phoebe, for other women in the study contributed to their ability to both reflect and be reflexive about their experience. It also suggests links between therapy, developing a language, and the production of knowledge.

Making visible the value of counselling and therapy in these sisters' narratives raises the question of women's access to psy discourses[3] (Rose 1996) in order to interpret their lives. For Rose, psy enables individuals to access new understandings of themselves and ways of acting on themselves. This invention or production of the self is for Rose historical as well as ontological. Drawing on Foucault (1985:6-7), Rose's interest lies in the historical construction of the self 'as experience; that is as something that can and must be thought'. These connections between subjectivity constructed through lived experience and knowledge/language is what is relevant in the current study. I want to suggest that the way that several of the women in the study were engaged in actively constructing their subjectivity through aspects of psy discourses stems from their experience of counselling or therapy.

Rose draws links between psy and 'government' - the idea of governance, a Foucauldian notion, or relations of power, which extend to the family and the government of the self. These links between subjectivity and power are pertinent in the case of sisters. The psy

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3 Rose (1996:4) refers to the 'psychosciences' including psychology, psychiatry and related disciplines that have emerged since the last half of the nineteenth century as 'psy'. Rose's project is to use psy to propose a genealogy of subjectivity. I am grateful to Val Gillies for bringing Rose's work to my attention.

discourses, Rose argues, have provided individuals with techniques for 'shaping and reforming selves' (Rose 1996:20-21) primarily through language and what he terms 'psychological foldings'. The implication of this form of construction of subjectivity, he stresses, lies in its recognition of individuals as 'subjects of freedom'. In other words, 'agentic subjectivity' (Maynard 1995:274) allows a remaking or 'creation of a reflexively ordered narrative of self' (Giddens 1992:31) aware of its historical formation - in the past - and with potential to shape the future. In Chamberlain's work (1997a; 1997b), on formations of subjectivities through narratives of transgenerational migration patterns, this historical self emerges as a global and 'syncretic self'[4] creating the new from the old. Chamberlain recounts how Barbadian women's tales of migration were tightly knit into stories of their female kin: their narratives of self became tales of the syncretic self or of several lives across many generations, looking back and ahead, where subjectivity took shape through images, memories and stories of kin and lineage.

In the current study, some of the women's experience of counselling or therapy produced narratives drawing on ideas from psy discourses: these narratives in turn contain images of 'agentic subjectivity' refashioning itself. I want to suggest that Rose's 'freedom' or Maynard's 'agentic subjectivity' is instrumental for women moving between the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. Changing subjectivity is considered in more detail in Chapter VIII.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses through three case studies of relationships between Suzanne and *Collette*, Hazel and Phoebe, and Jeanne's reflections on 'mothering' and 'being mothered' in her ties with her sisters. The case studies illustrate how the subject exists through experience, emotions and language, and also through institutionalised power relations based in the family - a key site for the construction of subjectivity. Both the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses incorporate subjectivity and power relations.

Each discourse embodies a different type of power relationship: the *positioned* discourse tends to be in some cases a hegemonic relationship of dominance and subordination as witnessed in specific examples of minimothering. The *shifting positions* discourse includes a flexible notion of dominance whereby women can change positions and alternately be dominant, dominated or more equal. The women's stories describe their location in relation to changing 'dominating positions' (Hey 1997:84) within the 'hegemonic' structure of the

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4 Syncretism refers to the attempt to sink differences and effect union between different sects or philosophical schools (Fowler and Fowler 1964).

family. The *positioned* discourse is made up of hegemonic practices to do with 'controlling' (Hazel uses this word) and 'policing' others (Hey 1997: 58) whereas the *shifting positions* discourse allows for flux of power.

A central idea is how movement occurs from one discourse to the other in practice and at the level of knowledge. The notion of 'agentic subjectivity' (Maynard 1995) was introduced as a mechanism whereby women can move out of the *positioned* into the *shifting positions* discourse. Sisters move out of the *positioned* discourse facilitating that themselves (Hazel), owing to circumstances (Suzanne), slip out of it temporarily (Beth) or remain there (Jeanne). Sisters can also move from the *shifting positions* to the *positioned* discourse, unintentionally, as in the case of Madonna and Roxanne (see Chapter VI). These changes occur through a combination of agentic subjectivity as in the case of Hazel's 'breaking out' or circumstances, for example Phoebe becoming a minimother through life events in her natal family.

This chapter highlighted the role of talk and emotions in the production of knowledge prior to the interview, including the role of counselling or therapy. Links between the women's narratives, their counselling experience and psy discourses (Rose 1996) were made to show the possibility for subjectivities to transform themselves. The link between 'agentic subjectivity' (Maynard 1995) and the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses is one that allows for change. As Epstein says (1993:12): 'We ourselves produce the discourses in which we are inscribed in certain subject positions - whether they be relatively powerful or powerless.' These discourses are forms of 'institutional structures' which maintain power relations (Epstein 1993:12), in this case, in the family.

These discourses are reproduced and re-constructed from the public realm into the private *lived cultures* (Johnson 1986) of sister relationships. During this process the discourses become modified and, particular to this gendered kinship tie, characterised by differences of age, marital status, education and class. The way that these discourses are transformed, recreated and reappropriated in the private are not unique to sister relationships; they are relevant for understanding and interpreting other ties between female friends where structural power differences are also played out in the private realm (Hey 1997). It could be argued that owing to sisters' different positionings in the family, they are bound to experience it differently.

The next chapter considers the process of change in sister relationships through a detailed analysis of subjectivity in conjunction with concepts mentioned in this and the previous chapters - emotions, silence and talk. It addresses the influences on and formation of

subjectivities within evolving relationships and in the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses.

Chapter VIII

Changing Subjectivity

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Introduction

This chapter examines the role played by changing or 'agentic subjectivity' (Maynard 1995), rooted in an awareness of a multiple and changing self, in the evolution of sister relationships. The focus is on the way that subjectivity develops within certain pre-defined contexts - such as the different types of sister ties, power relations, and specific life-stages. These three elements were discussed in the previous three chapters: *best friendship* and *companionship* ties in Chapter V; life events and turning-points in Chapter VI, and power relations in the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses in Chapter VII.

The emphasis here is, first, on the development of individual feminine subjectivities in the context of the sister relationship, what Hey (1997:141) termed the way that girls make themselves 'subjects within subordination' in heterosexuality, in this case in relation to the heterosexual and patriarchal structure of the family and power relations in sister ties. Secondly, the chapter analyses the way that these changing subjectivities can transform or not the very relationships in which they evolve. It traces the way that changing subjectivities emerge from either within or outside the sister relationship: typically, when the relationship is close as in *best friendship*, changing subjectivity is generated from within the sister tie; in the case of *distant companionship*, changing subjectivity develops outside the sister tie. In both instances, changing subjectivity can either influence the sister tie or not.

The first two sections of the chapter examine two *best friendship* case studies where changing subjectivity emerges in relation to a crisis: for Chloe and Annabel, the loss of Annabel's girlfriend leads to changes in both her subjectivity and her bond with Chloe. In Rae and Bukhi's relationship, the loss of Bukhi's boyfriend and motherhood for Rae changes the dynamics between them. The next two sections consider two *distant companionship* case studies where changing subjectivity develops outside the sister tie: for Clare, her disability and awareness of difference, led to distance between her and her sister *Stella*, and Clare's subjectivity evolved in the context of other friendships. For Rowena, jealousy and emotional distance from her sister *Grace* also influenced the way that her subjectivity changed outside this tie. These four case studies have been chosen for the stark contrast which they present: examples of *close companionship* could also have illustrated

these processes. In the four case studies, changing subjectivity is examined through the concepts of emotions, talk, and silence. In the final section, these expressions of subjectivity are highlighted in order to analyse its material production.

1. Emotions and talk: Chloe and Annabel

The first case study considers twins Chloe (20) and Annabel's (20) relationship; the second, Rae (30) and Bukhi's (25). The data for these *best friendship* case studies was generated from three interviews: a pair interview with Chloe and Annabel and two separate interviews with Rae and Bukhi. First, I consider some of the emotions in Chloe and Annabel's account of their relationship before exploring Rae and Bukhi's tie.

Chloe and Annabel, who described themselves as best friends, both aged 20, spoke about their tie together. Living and studying in different cities they spend less time together than they used to as teenagers when they lived at home, yet this has not significantly altered their relationship. They speak on the phone and see each other during the holidays. They spent the summer together and socialised as a foursome with their respective boyfriends although they are currently single.

There are three dominant emotions in Chloe and Annabel's narrative: anger, jealousy and pleasure or appreciation. These emotions can be traced chronologically: anger and conflict in their pre and early teen years;

> Chloe: [...] we used to fight like cat and dog [laughter]

and jealousy regarding boyfriends in their late teens:

> Annabel: Mmm, yeah I think I was jealous. I was jealous that Isaac got on with Chloe as well but that was at the stage where we were, we were only just starting to be friends, and, weren't we?

Chloe and Annabel also reflect on a moment in their mid-teens which marked a break with their early years of fighting, competition and 'personality clashes' when Annabel, who describes herself at that time as 'very naughty, like I did stupid things' and who took Chloe for granted, 'calmed down' and the two of them began to talk to each other. Chloe says:

> Chloe: I think there, there got to a stage where Annabel realised what she was like or doing and, um, she just sort of settled down and um, I think, um, a few, um, instances, um, brought us closer together and we were able to understand each other and talk about things which we'd never sort of, really, really done

The third emotion of pleasure or 'appreciation' which Chloe and Annabel now feel about each other was made explicit in their narrative: Annabel herself used this word when she said 'we appreciated each other'. It was also very embedded and implicit in the style of their interaction and talk - confiding, for example - and in the repeated outbursts of laughter throughout the interview. 'Appreciation' was in fact the dominant emotion in the dynamic and dialogue of the interview. How is their subjectivity constructed and produced through these emotions? And what role do these emotions play in the evolution of their relationship?

Chloe and Annabel's joint narrative was structured through episodes detailing important emotional events: their account of their tie was primarily constructed through *emotions*. Secondly, the style of their narrative was an intimate one of *confiding* in the dynamic between them as a twosome, and between them as participants and me as researcher. In addition, significant emotional moments in their tie coincided with a turning-point, either in one of the women's 'sense of self' or subjectivity (Holland 1996), in their relationship, or in both - subjectivity and relationship. An example of loss and sadness in Chloe and Annabel's mid-teens illustrates the connections between i) talk about emotions; ii) the intimate or private style of talk; and iii) changing subjectivities and relationships.

This turning-point in their relationship was prompted by crises for each of them with their girlfriends: Annabel's best friend Danielle became mentally ill signalling the end of their *best friendship* and one of the sisters' mutual friends, Emily, lost her mother. Annabel describes her sadness when she was 15-16 years-old at Danielle's illness and the ending of their friendship:

> Annabel: She went very er, I mean she was naagh, she, you know cut herself up um, made herself sick and and just basically, was just causing mayhem in the, and disrupting the school routine, let alone, you know, mine, and, you know, she was just disrupting everything and it was just this attention seeking thing which I couldn't handle because I had to take on
> MM: Yeah
> Annabel: Her, you know, I had to help her and you know [...] the teacher used to say to me, you know, oh go, go and see how Danielle is Annabel, you know, off, off you trot, see how she is and then, it just used to, it was just so much of a strain and it was, I mean, I couldn't bear just watching her you know, my best friend. I mean it was really upsetting [...]

This event brought about changes in the twins' relationship:

> Annabel: it was very upsetting for me because it was like losing a, I mean fortunately, I, you know, I've, well Chloe's my best friend now, I mean. Fortunately, you know, but Danielle was the only best friend that I've ever had, as in a friend friend [...] My best friend Danielle and, and I don't know whether you noticed that, that I was
> Chloe: I don't know, I mean maybe it was the first time that you noticed, not noticed me, but didn't take for granted, that I was there and I don't know, I think
> Annabel: I think, I mean
> Chloe: I can't remember the exact time or anything but we just, I think you appreciated me being there for someone you know, to talk to.
> Annabel: Yeah, yeah and also I mean like when Emily's mother died of cancer. Yeah and I suppose I, I was very, I never really talked about much, many things and I suppose that
> Chloe: I think it was a time where we both grew up
> Annabel: It happened, those two instances happened at very similar times and then we just suddenly realised, oh right, we, we've got some understanding here and um
> Chloe: Yeah, and we realised that, you know, I guess we did, we just started talking, I can't
> Annabel: We appreciated each other.

This moment where talk about emotions coincided with distressing events for each of them to do with their girlfriends also brought about a change in the power relations between Chloe and Annabel. From a position where Annabel was dominant, they moved to a situation in which they describe themselves as more equal:

> Chloe: Things, people, it's nice to have someone your age er around Annabel. I just realised that, I mean, we, we could actually talk about about, how we were feeling and
> Chloe: Yeah, and Annabel was no longer sort of, trying to, looking down upon me or anything
> Annabel: Trying to be impressed, trying to be the
> Chloe: And, you know, regarded me as an equal I suppose that's, that's what it was
> Annabel: That was the start
> Chloe: And I didn't, I thought oh, that's really good, you know, that she can do that now and um, and I suppose it got better and better, I mean we tolerated each other better and, you know, you just, I don't know, suppose as you grow up, you do, you just appreciate
> Annabel: Yeah I mean I had to grow up, I mean I had to, not, I mean, I thought, I was growing up really fast, you know, at the age of 13 or 14 and I think I did but I actually grew up or matured properly at the age of 15 or 16 because I really had to be sensible and mature about, you know, what was happening to Danielle and I had to be, I had to grow up. I really had to

calm down, you know, and things took a more serious tone at that stage and, and I think that's when we started talking and I accepted Chloe or rather, you accepted me more. It happened at the same time.
Chloe: Mmm. Well, no, yeah, well it's a two-way thing isn't it?
Annabel: Mmm.
Chloe: Definitely.
Annabel: Because before we just didn't really accept each other, did we? Because I think I was the dominant one and
Chloe: Yeah.
Annabel: You couldn't stand that.

Several themes emerge here: acknowledging and accepting difference, a move out of the *positioned* into the *shifting positions* discourse, and changing subjectivity. What stands out in this discussion is the important change which occurred when Chloe and Annabel began to talk to each other about how they felt about the distressing events regarding their friendships with Danielle and Emily. This change took place in both their relationship *and* in Annabel's case, her subjectivity or sense of self. This is an example of changing subjectivity being generated by external events which leads to positive changes in the sister relationship.

2. Narratives of change and power: Rae and Bukhi

Another case of critical external events provoking crisis and change in the sister tie related to strong emotional reactions is illustrated by Rae and Bukhi's bond. Events in their *best friendship* reveal similar patterns as in Chloe and Annabel's tie. Rae (30) and Bukhi's (25) separate though 'allied' (Song 1998) narratives were similarly structured around emotions and interpreting and understanding them. The contact between them and the strength of their tie is greater now that they are older and live in the same city rather than in the family home. Growing up, the five year age gap between them meant that Rae kept her distance from her two younger sisters, Bukhi and *Mira* (22).

Now however Rae and Bukhi are very involved in each other's lives through work and childcare. They have contact at least two to three times a fortnight - on the phone, at work, at home when Bukhi baby-sits for Rae's daughter Sasha, and during shopping expeditions or meals out together. They highlight several elements in their relationship: Rae supported Bukhi's move to the city that she was already living in, put her up when she first arrived, and also encouraged her to enter higher education as a mature student. Bukhi was Rae's birthing partner.

Bukhi summarises the trajectory of her relationship with Rae:

> Bukhi: I think as soon as she moved to [the city] that was just a really big change in how we got on. Because she'd always, she's only five years older than me but it just seemed a lot, a bigger gap than me and my sister [*Mira*]. I think it's because my brother was like...I used to think well, there was those two and then there was us two and she left home quite young so...I don't think I knew her as well before she left home and I think once she left home, because I wanted to leave home as well, that was like, we were able to start getting to know each other really well. And then I think the major thing was when she had Sasha and she asked me if I wanted to go to the birth and I was like...really pleased that she'd asked me and that was...that was the best thing that I've ever...that was just amazing going to the...amazing seeing the birth and Rae! And I felt really really close to her, got really involved beforehand and afterwards. It's like I was saying before, now I feel like...I can give her back, she did a lot for me when I was first in [the city], now I feel I can sort of help her with Sasha and look after Sasha and just...it's more like, I can talk to her and give her advice sometimes now. Whereas before it was always Rae usually and I was always like...oh, I don't know what I'm doing, whereas it seems to have changed a bit now and we're sort of more....more like on a level...

Bukhi's snapshot of the changes in their relationship traces its evolutions into the *shifting positions* discourse where their actions and involvement in each other's lives became, over time, reciprocal.

The main elements of their accounts centre around a series of 'emotional ups and downs' in their relationship. For Rae, these emotions concern her anger and sadness at Bukhi's distress regarding the whole process of Bukhi's break-up with her ex-boyfriend, coupled with her 'love' for Bukhi.

> Rae: [...] I had a lot of respect for her and I was really happy. As well as just, you know, her being my sister and I, I do love her a lot.

Bukhi feels upset about both her break-up with her boyfriend and the way that she 'took out' her anger on Rae. She says:

> Bukhi: I think we'll always be, I think we will always be really close now, I don't think I'll go back to, I think before it was like, phases but I think that was like, because I was sort of growing up, couldn't imagine not getting on with her for a long period of time now. I don't think so, no. [...] I think that time was a bad time for me anyway. And I know that I took it out on her a bit.

This example of heightened emotion to do with 'boyfriend management' (Hey 1995:9) is a central feature of their narratives where talk about emotions, the intimate style of talking and change are embedded. Here is Rae's version of this difficult time in her twenties when Bukhi decided to leave her boyfriend. Rae recounts the way that she and Bukhi handled the ending together:

> Rae: Well, she told me everything, well more or less everything when she was upset. It was an immediate, you know, she, she could go to the pub or wherever and have a drink with people and and get by, whereas if I went with her and we were on our own, she'd say, or if, or if she came and spoke to me, she'd say, oh I'm upset about this and this happened and that happened and she'd tell me everything. So I would kind of go through her emotional ups and downs with her.

Rae describes her own emotional distress regarding the break-up that she witnessed in Bukhi's life and how her feelings of 'upset' turned into anger and she 'exploded':

> Rae: [...] she came up with this whole spiel of, I haven't got anything to, er, anybody to love, well nobody loves me, more or less. And I know that she was upset and we've all been there and, and said those things or felt those things and I just felt so angry that she was in this position. I didn't blame her entirely but I felt that she was the only person that could get herself out of it but I couldn't, I just couldn't logically say, well, do this or do that. So I just exploded myself because I never do, I always kind of say, oh well, I just, I was upset that she, that she was sort of at the end of her
> MM: Tether?
> Rae: Yeah.

Here is a further illustration of the effect of the 'boyfriend management' episode on Rae and Bukhi, of how intertwined emotions and the process of change are. Rae's outrage, exasperation and distress at both Bukhi's reaction to her break-up - 'grief' - and at her own emotional response to Bukhi's experience is minutely expressed in the extract below. A number of themes appear: first, Rae's astonishment at the change she notices in Bukhi - 'she was slightly losing it a bit'; second, Rae's intensely emotional response to the change she notices in Bukhi - Rae starts to cry and shake. Third, there is Bukhi's shock at her sister's emotions expressed physically and the change this prompts in her: in Rae's words, 'she immediately snapped out of her grief'.

> Rae: [...] I just felt I, I couldn't give anything and the only thing that I could give, there was just a really sort of black on white view of, look Bukhi, how can you say that? I mean, and I started crying and I said, look how can you say? How can you be this far? How can some, another man do this to you, get you into this state? Look at you, I can't cope, I can't bear to see you like

> this, you need help, you need to go and speak to somebody, you're going to, you need, you, I just thought she was going to do something ridiculous. I knew that she wouldn't because I, I've got this kind of confidence in her anyway that she's not, you know, sort of suicidal or anything like that, but I just felt emotionally she was um...she was losing it a bit and not, not the sort of full person that I've always known her to be and she was becoming one of these people who, she says, oh I'm depressed because of this. Well I think, well go abroad, you know, go on holiday, I'll give you the money to go on holiday, I, I'll lend you, I'll borrow the money. Go away with this person and, and you, you need to do something. Anyway so I, I, and I just started crying and I started shaking. Then, then she immediately snapped out of her grief and sort of said, oh my god Rae, I've never seen you like this. And she was starting to say to me, calm down, calm down. I said, I can't calm down, I can't see you like, I can't cope with you like this. And I was really upset and then

This example illustrates how emotions and change are tightly enmeshed at the micro-level in the interactions of a relationship. The types of changes in subjectivity and relationships observed at this level also operate at the macro-level over the course of time in a relationship and it is here that the postmodern concept of 'shift' can be useful, particularly in relation to shifts in relationships.

This time of emotional upheaval for the sisters is summed up by Rae when she says: 'But, um, it was just a really difficult time but it did bring us closer together.' This contradictory moment in their relationship coincided with a period of change both in their own senses of self or subjectivity and in their relationship with each other, as Rae hints at when she indicates that it brought them 'closer together'. How do these narratives of change emerge?

Subjectivity in these ties is constructed and takes form through the different facets of relationships encompassed by the concepts of contact, emotions and talk. Narratives of change (Sandmaier 1995; Mathias 1994) or 'reflexive personal narratives' (Giddens 1992) are particularly significant for understanding aspects of individual subjectivities and relationships. We have seen how women's subjectivity and sister relationships are constructed by and through change to do with emotions, a specific style of talk appropriate to disclosing emotions and, underlying this, contact.

Another element structuring Rae and Bukhi's narratives is power relations: both the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses may contradict and yet co-exist within *best friendship*. For example sister best friends may also experience other dimensions of their relationship as *positioned* or as part of a role reversal or *shifting positions*. How do these shifts appear in the narratives of changing subjectivity? As stated by Bloom and Munro (1995:99), multiple and contradictory 'subject positions' can coexist. Examples of these

tensions between different and coexisting subject positions are present in the two case studies of Chloe and Annabel's and Rae and Bukhi's relationships.

As seen in the last chapter, the *positioned* discourse seems to reproduce elements of mother-daughter relationships. In Rae's narrative there are several instances of the way that, as the eldest sibling and daughter, she was either positioned by other family members including her sister or herself as the 'responsible' one or the person in charge. As a 10 year-old she would regularly prepare the 'tea' for her three siblings as both her parents worked. Rae describes this process of positioning herself as 'big' sister in relation to the 'boyfriend management' episode:

> Rae: Maybe I was upset at the fact that I couldn't help her and I wanted to. I've always felt semi-responsible for her because I kind of helped her move to [the new city]. I mean, I don't feel like that any more. I had felt at the time semi-responsible and I just, I couldn't bear her to be so upset. And I, I hated this man for, for treating her like he did.

Rae also gives an example of the *shifting positions* discourse when during her pregnancy and especially after Sasha's birth she experienced Bukhi as more of an older sister. She had asked Bukhi to be her birthing partner and Bukhi attended antenatal classes with her:

> Rae: And she gave me, she gave me a lot of confidence and she was almost like my older sister I felt, plus she, she, she, she's had more experience in some ways because she's had more boyfriends than me and I've always felt that she's more, not lots more boyfriends, that's silly. She's had more friendships with people um and she's quite wise I think and she really helped, she really helps out. And I could talk to her about lots of things but if I'm, I really trust Bukhi and if I'm worried about something I, I tell her.

And Bukhi's version corroborates Rae's:

> Bukhi: I've been able to help her out a lot now, so I feel...I think I feel better about it...we get on a lot better because I feel that I can help her out now whereas before she was always sort of helping me out and it was always me that was sort of messing up or...

This instance of a role reversal between them reflects the way the positions or roles within the relationship are not fixed: sisters can oscillate between 'helping' and receiving help.

These shifts between the *positioned* discourse and the role reversal or *shifting positions* discourse all take place in the context of *best friendship* for Rae and Bukhi. They also occur in the context of changing subjectivity and changing relationships for both of them. All

these elements of awareness of her own changing subjectivity, talk, the *positioned* discourse, their changing sister relationship, and emotions are laced through Rae's narrative. She says:

> Rae: [...] I know now that whatever I say, it's up to her and she's her own person and she'll, I'll never know everything about her. It was like, it was getting to that thing where she was telling me everything and I was going through the ups and downs with her but having the frustration of not being able to do anything myself. [...] with Bukhi I couldn't just say to her, because she couldn't just finish with him, and um she couldn't, it wasn't, it was too easy for me to say that. I had to go, I had to let her make the decision, especially being an older sister. Um...but it just brought us closer together because especially that time when I got upset, then she got upset because I was so upset and then it was, it was, it was one of the first times that I felt that she, she really cared about how I felt in this, because I did feel involved with her and I didn't expect her to keep it to herself. I mean, you know, she had to tell me or somebody and I was the one, which I'm, I'm glad of because I do want to share the good times and the bad times with her. Um, she just loved him, that's all. She couldn't help it. She, you can't act rationally if you love somebody and I didn't want her to love him, so that was all.

From Bukhi's perspective, she gradually accepted the break-up with her boyfriend, felt closer to Rae as a result of becoming an aunt and in her own words, grew up:

> Bukhi: I'd split up with my boyfriend, everything was a complete mess really. And then I started not getting on with Rae as well. And it just seemed like, oh god it's never ever going to get sorted out. But...it did...I think it was just time, I just got over not going out with this guy and stopped taking it out on Rae, I think. And then she had Sasha and that brought us together, all that feeling from before...

A significant aspect of this process was Bukhi's sense of her changing subjectivity over the years. She says:

> Bukhi: I always used to feel a bit like that, overshadowed by Rae...and probably act differently when Rae was there whereas now I think, as I've got older, I've got more of a sense of who I am and that I can behave how I want to behave - whether Rae is there or not, I'll still be the same sort of person and maybe it's, she's doing the same thing. [...] As I've become older, I've become more aware of myself anyway and what I want to do and a bit more happy within myself. I think that's one of the main things [...] ...I just think that I've grown up more and it's been great that she's been here. To sort of help me out while I've been doing that. [...]

At the same time, she also recognises the way that her own changing self was inextricably tied up with her changing relationship with Rae. She says:

> Bukhi: it sort of swings around, but I do think, yeah, there's definite phases but I think that's because people change, don't they, and you go through your own phases yourself.

These two examples of *best friendship* between Chloe and Annabel and Rae and Bukhi illustrate some of the ways in which agentic change occurs in relation to events external to the sister relationship. In the first case loss, of a girlfriend, and in the second, loss of a boyfriend and motherhood. Internal events, in opposition, might include forms of betrayal. In both cases, the women's subjectivities changed within the relationships and partly as a result of these relationships: in addition, their subjectivities then influenced the dynamics of their sister bond with shifts in both instances from the *positioned* to the *shifting positions* discourse. Significantly, these changing relationships are marked by both positive and negative change which the sisters are able to recognise and discuss together.

3. Separateness and difference: Clare and Stella

In this section and the next, examples of *distant companionship* illustrate relationships where there is little change within the sister tie itself and in individual subjectivity in that context. Nevertheless, these women's subjectivities do change outside the sister bond. The relationships explored are those between Clare (50) and *Stella* (52), and Rowena (37) and *Grace* (34). The material for these two case studies draws on two individual interviews, one with Clare and another with Rowena, so there is only one perspective on these sister ties, unlike the previous two case studies. Their narratives reveal the gaps and silences in the tie to do, in these cases, with physical disability and geographical distance. Here, there is either little change or else change in the form of increased distance which the sisters do not acknowledge together or talk about.

Clare who is single and her older sister *Stella*, married with four children, live in different parts of the country and have little contact with each other. Clare says that they were 'never close'. As teenagers, they did not do things together, and although Clare wanted her to be, and envied *Stella*'s status, Stella was not 'an older sister'. Clare says:

> Clare: I wanted her to be an elder sister, and I think...I don't know I think she pushed me away a bit, I wanted to dress like her and be like her and my mother says I wanted to go to the same school as she did and we certainly went to the same schools all the way up until I was 12, but she was never a big sister to me. And I suppose, I had to just go out and find my own friends.

Although, according to Clare, they get on 'quite well now', 'we do get on superficially' she says, the distance between them is palpable:

> Clare: Yes, she said to me, oh fairly recently, oh well you always get what you want...in the end, don't you, which is actually [not] necessarily true at all.

Their distant tie is marked by infrequent contact and little physical intimacy. The sisters see each other around four times a year, mainly when Clare visits her mother who lives near *Stella*. At a recent family gathering, Clare was struck by their physical distance:

> Clare: she can't bear touching, she doesn't...I never kiss her...actually I did kiss her at her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary for the first time ever I think.

Clare was partially disabled in one arm until her teens and found it difficult to carry out routine activities like brushing her hair for example. Her disability was never talked about among her parents or her two siblings. She says: 'it was just expected that I would get on with it and so I did.' She says of her disability:

> Clare: I've never discussed it with my sister, ever [laughs]. Other than she used to help me with my hair. I mean, for instance, I remember it was difficult as a teenager and I would sometimes very very rarely ask for help with something and the response would be, why? Why can't you do it yourself? I know, it's quite incredible, and possibly that has, possibly that is, I don't know, it is quite complicated. My sister is very different from me.

Clare's disability remained invisible in the family even when at 11, she decided to wear a prosthesis. Even in her adulthood, it still remains silenced. Clare says:

> Clare: Nobody ever asked me what it was, that caused me to then say, I would like to have a prosthesis and I did find it very difficult. I found it very difficult to wear it and I found the whole thing as a teenager very difficult.

Educational achievements created a further difference between them, as in the case of Leila and *Annar* (see Chapter VI). *Stella* failed her school exams but Clare sailed through with no hard work. Clare also describes herself as more outgoing than her reserved sister. Both sisters trained as English teachers: Clare stopped half-way through when her father died. It was Clare, age 19, who broke the news to *Stella*:

> Clare: ...we weren't able to [be] close which I always felt was rather sad and I sort of felt that she resented it was me that was giving her this news.

At this point Clare returned home to support her mother and *Stella* went on to qualify. At the end of her training *Stella* returned home and 'took over' from Clare to be with their mother.

Each of them felt neglected by their mother, a hard-working solicitor, and resentful of the little time that she spent with her children. *Stella*, according to Clare, nursed this resentment whereas Clare just got on with things: she says that her disability obliged her to do so. Paradoxically, then, her physical difference became a strength and she describes her changing subjectivity explicitly:

> Clare: it's been easier for me because I've built on successes if you know what I mean. Because I've had to deal with things and succeeded in dealing with them, that gives you a springboard all the way up your life.

While they were growing up, the two girls were positioned as carers in the household. From the age of ten, Clare's father became an invalid and more of a 'grand-fatherly figure' and so the sisters in this 'matriarchal family' took over. In their teens, both sisters were positioned as minimothers: 'my mother never cooked, you see. My sister and I did the cooking from when we were 12.' Clare grew up in a household where lunch was the main meal of the day prepared by a paid worker: at the weekends and in the holidays the young girls took it in turns to cook. This gendered division of labour fuelled their resentment towards their brother who was waited on by their mother.

Both sisters were sent away from home to boarding school partly owing to their mother's strong Scottish work ethic and long working hours, and partly in order to remove the problem of domestic labour that was requested of both daughters. Clare disliked the boarding school experience and returned home. She describes the way that they competed for their mother's attention especially when *Stella* returned from boarding school and their mother compensated for her guilt for sending her away by 'getting things nice': this exacerbated the resentment against their older sister which both Clare and her brother felt.

In their twenties, the sisters' paths diverged further as each struggled to detach herself from their mother and leave the nest. Clare's incisive reflections on the links between mother-daughter and sister relationships in terms of emotions and power relations echo comments made by other women (see Chapter VII, section 2 on Suzanne and *Collette* and section 4 on Hazel and Phoebe). Recalling *Stella*'s meeting of her future husband soon after their father's

death, and their mother's 'beastly' reaction to this, led Clare to speculate on the important role mothers play in sister relationships where they can divide or unite daughters:

> Clare: I think that must make a huge difference to all women, I suspect this is what ferments sister relationships, not for men...so they either work or they don't and it will work depending on the mother. [...] I think there are two things, if the sisters are thrown together so that, and...the personalities are such that they have only each other, then against some, whatever it is...some...some problem, whether it's the mother or family or isn't...so they unite, then I think you get a very strong bond. I think you probably also get a very strong...the healthiest strongest bond where there isn't, where the mother has a good relationship with both children and the jealousy doesn't, it must be very difficult...I mean, obviously, hugely difficult to bring up children. But to do it in such a way that jealousy doesn't arise.

Clare touches on the notion of mothers who can play sisters 'off' against each other:

> Clare: The reverse is if, that if the mother then divides them, if she actually divides them and of course my mother actually would do this quite deliberately, it would be part of her...how much do you love me? I mean, it was never said but she...for instance she had a beastly little dog and she always had this dreadful Pomeranian and he was really snappy and not just snappy, I mean he would really bite. And she would say, go on, try and take him away from me [laughs] ...knowing that you would go, and I think she played us off against each other. Yes, it's a power thing as well.

Her interpretation of the role of mothers is that they either divide daughters and set them against each other or let daughters flourish which can lead to solidarity between them. She continues:

> Clare: if the relationship is good [...] between the mother and [daughters] and the mother is happy and content in herself as a person er...and [...] she can deal with her own problems without putting it onto the children then she can perhaps manage a relationship.

Domestic circumstances - an employed mother absent for long hours - and Clare's isolation in the family owing to her disability led her to develop kin and friendship ties outside the home. For example, she became very close to a now deceased aunt who looked after her as a newborn when her mother started a new job. And she made friends more easily than her siblings did, sometimes even 'acquiring' their friends which also created resentment. Her girlfriends are drawn from several eras in her life: those she has known for several decades and are scattered around the country and who she does not see very often; her two closest

friends who she has known for 5-6 years, one who she rings up several times a week; and other friends who have also experienced a disability in their family.

In addition, she bonded with two cousins on different sides of the family, Joan (45) and Agatha (65). She became close to the latter when they both shared the care of Agatha's dying sister, Enid (70). Many of Clare's complex emotions regarding *Stella* were brought to the surface when Stella became involved in caring for Enid, an 'interesting scenario', in Clare's words. Although Clare was the one who maintained the most regular contact with Agatha and Enid, and both she and Agatha were caring for Enid during her illness, it was *Stella* who was at Enid's side when she died causing Clare to feel very resentful. This has resonance with the death of their father (see above) when the roles were reversed.

Clare, the closest relative to Enid geographically, rushed to her when she discovered that she was terminally ill:

> Clare: I dropped everything and I went down and what happened was that for about six weeks Agatha and I more or less between us packaged it out, so that I would go down on Thursday...Friday and stay through to Monday and then Agatha went down on Monday to Thursday and so either Agatha or I were there.

Clare was almost affronted when *Stella* became involved:

> Clare: we didn't really need her, you know, and she was obviously, sort of...didn't...she didn't have a role to play, whereas we'd sort of established this role.

A further interpretation of Clare's resentment of *Stella*'s arrival on the scene could be traced to the way that Clare and Agatha, as two younger sisters, positioned themselves as carers for Enid, mothering her during her final days. They did not relish *Stella*, as older sister, taking on that role. This reading is interesting in the light of Clare's wish as a girl for *Stella* to be *more* of an elder sister. In this situation where *Stella* assumed some responsibility for caring for her cousin, Clare is almost jealous of her, admitting to emotions of resentment reminiscent of similar feelings she experienced as a teenager:

> Clare: somehow or other Agatha and I, and we both felt this, sort of resented *Stella*'s presence and we weren't quite sure...I know, it's very odd. Very odd, I don't know why we did...er...and I felt all the resentment I did as a teenager. And then er...I missed the death in the end, I mean it sounds as though I was looking forward to it, which I wasn't, but you know what it's like, and yet it was a funny situation because the whole thing was that there was so much laughter there, it was a very uplifting experience actually

> and er... But anyway I'd gone back to have a bath because we'd been there, up all night and I'd just gone back for a quick bath and feed and er...was going back and she died while I was away and Agatha said to me, she said, it was actually *Stella* who was standing by her and not me because... [...] and I know it was that *Stella* just didn't know...what... She wanted to play a part and I felt really bad that we felt that we didn't want her. Awful, but it's what we felt. And I really was very resentful that it was *Stella* who came told me that Enid had died. In fact, I was quite cross. I think she just thought I was upset. I don't think she realised I was cross.

This episode is also about exclusivity. Enid's death brought Clare and Agatha closer: 'Agatha is older than I am but we are, but Agatha and I are we...we have the genetic thing and we read the same books and we laugh at the same things'.

At intervals, throughout the interview, Clare mused on the delicate and discreet process of breaking away that she went through in order to embrace her subjectivity - a subjectivity largely constructed through difference. Her narrative is punctuated by moments of reflection: pondering on how she has been shaped by her disability, she stresses her independence and an unwillingness to consider herself different. Yet in other ways, she clearly positions herself as 'different' from other members of her family. For example, her self-description as the 'black sheep of the family' enabled her to distance herself in what for her was a positive way by rejecting the work ethic so dominant in her family. Proudly, she asserts her 'laziness':

> Clare: I think, I probably found quite early on that I could get away with a very bare minimum and then do things in a rush at the end and just about scrape and that's the story of my life.

She continues:

> Clare: I've had [a] very unstructured life so I've always expected things to turn up and sometimes they have and sometimes they haven't and I will...go with whatever is going really.

She moves on to encapsulate succinctly her awareness of her own subjectivity:

> Clare: I was the favourite in a way apart from...because I have a...I do have an out-going personality and I will always make friends now whether or not this is because, you know, it wasn't there in the family. I mean, one can sort of make those things that, you know, you didn't, there wasn't enough mothering there and so you go and find people to, surrogate people to be friends with

In a sense, Clare's subjectivity has hardly changed since her days as a girl when she made her own friends outside her family circle. Her path and *Stella*'s have evolved in different directions, with Clare remaining single, working and establishing her own social networks, and Stella, marrying and raising a family of her own.

As adults, in their current lives, Clare and *Stella*, 'are moving much into a very mellow, rather nice phase' yet at the same time Clare is aware of not wanting to bond too much with her 'niblings' - nephews and nieces - now in their twenties (Parkin 1997). When she contemplates a possible rapprochement with *Stella*, she realises that this could be engineered if she felt more enthusiastic:

> Clare: She would like to be more intimate I think, but she doesn't know how, and I suppose this is my fault, I do, and she doesn't, and I could. I'm the one who could actually make the moves.

Much of Clare's account of her relationship with *Stella* is structured or constructed around the body, around her arm - its physical and verbal absence in her own life, in the family, and in her relationship with *Stella* - and around difference. The themes of disability and difference, their silencing in the family, by her parents - out of parental guilt, Clare suspects - by her sister, and also by herself dominate her tie with *Stella* and her construction of her own subjectivity.

Looking back as well as at the present, Clare is aware of her own insensitivity towards her sister *Stella*, the lack of direct communication between them stemming from their girlhoods, and *Stella*'s own misunderstanding of Clare - all of which have contributed to their tie of *distant companionship*. Clare analyses the situation:

> Clare: I think I was pretty rotten to her really [laughs]. I think I was insensitive. She didn't understand and I think I...I suppose I didn't either but...I..could...I should have shown more sensitivity to her at various times I think... [...] we are much...closer than we were but we'll never be very close because we don't share the same interests you know. And the same tastes.

In effect, Clare's subjectivity, while formed and constructed inside the family, developed and changed outside it - and outside the sister tie in particular. Unlike the previous examples of *best friendship*, in this case, there were no changes in Clare and *Stella*'s tie of *distant companionship* over time.

4. Silences and memories: Rowena and Grace

Rowena (37) and *Grace*'s (34) tie, first described in Chapter V (section 4), similarly to Clare and *Stella*'s, is marked by the absence of change in the sister relationship itself. Any change in Rowena's subjectivity occurred outside the space of her *distant companionship* with *Grace* who lives at a considerable distance in Alaska. Rowena's account of her relationship with *Grace* dates back to their girlhoods when, similarly to Clare and *Stella*, they fought physically, had separate friends and argued over boyfriends. In one instance, one of Rowena's old flames wanted to go out with *Grace*: it was not a case of jealousy, more 'cringing' because both of them felt that he was 'awful'. In another, it was definitely jealousy: Rowena remembers one of *Grace*'s boyfriends who *Grace* always thought Rowena was trying to steal.

Rowena's feelings of ambivalence stem from their school-days: *Grace* was the one who got on with homework and exams whereas Rowena worked in bursts of adrenalin and felt anxious about exams. Rowena remembers how competitive they were, attending the same single-sex grammar school, comparing their exam results, returning home separately with their own friends. She freely admits that she has always been jealous of *Grace*. However, as they both now work in male-dominated environments, they talk about the stress involved. And Rowena is proud of *Grace*'s achievements as a geologist:

> Rowena: at the same time as being jealous of her, I've been very very proud of her as well, very proud of her. That she went into very much a man's world... [...] I felt immensely proud of her...that there she was travelling, proud at the same time jealous because I felt I couldn't have done it myself, to have travelled alone. And then she ended up in Alaska and she's never come back since.

Rowena was not positioned as an older sister and did not experience herself as a minimother, in a way that is reminiscent of the way Clare described *Stella* as not being an older sister to her. Rowena was not the older sister who looked after *Grace*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, they did not have a 'leading relationship'. *Grace*, Rowena says, 'looked after herself'. Older sisters are not automatically *all* located in the *positioned discourse*, as these counter-examples of older sisters not adopting a position of minimothering reveal.

Rowena paused in her narrative to consider the patterns of silence and exchange existing with different members of her family. In particular, she recognised her option to disclose personal, sensitive emotional information to her sister or withhold it. She became more aware of these options during the research process as she mulled over her silence to *Grace* and other family members about a recent operation:

> Rowena: I haven't told my sister er...I mean until I said that now, it hadn't occurred to me a) that I hadn't told her and b) that I might tell her, I mean I haven't actually told my mother either. The only person I've told in my family is my older brother er...but then, that's actually because I hadn't seen my mother...and in fact, I've almost avoided ringing her, just because...for one period I ^^ very much feared telling her. Anyway, I shall see her this weekend and I shall probably tell her this weekend. Yes...

A recent significant change that had occurred in Rowena's life in connection with her becoming a mother was her decision to give up working. With support from mainly non-kin, her changing subjectivity emerged outside the context of her relationship with her sister. She describes this process in relation to her work and motherhood:

> Rowena: I'm in a bit of a limbo, at the moment I've got no desire to go back to work. I thought at one point, I could never give up work er...but that's all the identity the work gives you, was too important to me, but things have changed.

She contrasted herself to *Grace* in terms of decision-making, describing *Grace* as more 'grounded' and self-sufficient, able to make decisions alone, whereas Rowena experiences herself as more indecisive and needing to bounce ideas off others. She comments:

> Rowena: something about that thing of self-sufficiency as being...standing on your own two feet and not depending on...others.

Another important element of Rowena's subjectivity is her identity as a parent: she comments on how she and her friends have become parents at a similar time while *Grace* remains single. Hence, she discusses parenting issues more with her friends and mother than with her sister. She is very aware of the geographical distance and how if and when *Grace* has children, the cousins will not have much contact.

However, one crack that Rowena discerned in the exterior that *Grace* presents to the world is her sensitivity about her body size. When Rowena overheard someone call her 'fat Gracie', she realised that perhaps *Grace* was jealous of Rowena's slighter build. Rowena says:

> Rowena: there was a big thing about, 'I'm happy the way I am you know'. She gives off this exterior of being very happy the way she is and of being very self-sufficient. And I've always presumed she is, but sometimes, occasionally maybe there's a crack, and this fatness thing is maybe a bit of a crack, I don't know.

These comments reflect Rowena's gradual understanding of *Grace*'s subjectivity, more fragile than it would appear, in contrast with the 'self-sufficiency' which she presents.

Rowena recalled the past in the interview and her narrative combined reminiscences and recent reflections on family relationships. She considered the way that aspects of the present can 'spark off' memories from the past, especially familiar patterns that are being replicated in the present. She was aware of parallels between the past and the present in relation to her two young daughters and strove to avoid comparing them in order not to foster competitiveness. For example, she described the literature on sibling rivalry regarding her daughters, as motherhood had prompted her to analyse her relationship with *Grace* in relation to early conflict. One of her goals as a parent, she says, is 'to break the cycle', just as Suzanne (see Chapter VII), mentioned her desire to raise her daughters in a different way than she and her sister were brought up by their mother.

She described contradictory feelings towards *Grace*. On the one hand, she does not mind the lack of closeness; but on the other, she feels sad about this absence as *Grace* is 'somebody I go back to year dot with'. Although Rowena would like greater intimacy and contact with *Grace*, she acknowledges that the bond between them has been stretched over the years and has not always been positive as explained earlier (see Chapter V, section 3).

These two case studies of *distant companionship* reveal the silences and gaps related to, in Rowena and *Grace*'s case, jealousy and geographical distance, and in that of Clare and *Stella*, to physical disability and difference. In both, there is either little change, change in the form of increased distance which the sisters do not acknowledge together or talk about, or change in individual sisters' subjectivity outside the sister tie itself. It would have been interesting to see whether this definition of *distant companionship* would have been corroborated by an interview with the other sister in each of these case studies, as illustrated by both Beth and Louise's narratives of their tie of *distant companionship* mentioned in Chapter IV (see section 5). Here, the analysis was based on two individual interviews only, rather than on separate interviews with both Rowena and her sister *Grace* and Clare and her sister, *Stella*.

5. The material production of subjectivity

The different types of emotions that are experienced in the sister relationship - anger, jealousy, sadness, possessiveness, appreciation and joy - are highlighted throughout the chapters of the thesis. It is through the role of talk, silence and emotions in these changing ties that the analysis of the four case studies in this chapter was structured. Emotions

encompass the range of feelings that sisters experience about each other, about their own relationship, and about their ties and lives with other kin and non-kin. Emotions, in addition to contact patterns, constitute some of the processes through which sister relationships are constructed.

The concept of 'talk' refers to the discussions that take place between sisters both in their lives *and* during the interview with the researcher. Its significance lies in its role in constructing friendship: 'Talking with friends is constitutive of friendship; through talking, we do 'being friends' ' (Coates 1996:263). Talk emerged in the data about a range of topics including the body - sexuality and health, 'every day talk', work, and emotions themselves. There were also variations in the different styles of talk - bickering, teasing, having a giggle, gossiping, confiding, asking and giving advice and listening. And there was also 'catching up' talk, playful and serious talk (Coates 1996:285).

The importance of talk and its absence marked each of the case studies considered in this chapter. For Rae and Bukhi, their talks during Bukhi's split with her boyfriend led to greater understanding between them. Bukhi, for example, stressed her desire to be listened to rather than being told what to do, and her contradictory desire for both honesty and not wanting to feel upset by what she hears. Here she describes this form of listening as support:

> Bukhi: at other times it just sort of goes backwards and forwards and I'll have some sort of...I mean I split up with my boyfriend the year before last and I was in a real mess. I didn't know what I was doing and Rae was really good then because she didn't...it seemed like, instead of her telling me what to do... Whereas before I felt like she'd tell me what to do, she was just listening to what I was saying and say well...you know, you could do this. But she wasn't really telling me what to do and then I'd sort of say what I wanted to do and she'd say, yes fine. And basically I felt that everything I was saying I wanted to do, she was saying, that's fine, I'll just support you and that was all I needed.

In addition, Bukhi also wanted Rae to be more direct and open with her, for example to tell her when she was getting on her nerves:

> Bukhi: I was just annoyed with her I was just fed up with...I think I felt that she wasn't being honest with me all the time and I was saying, you don't er...you don't seem to tell me when I'm getting on your nerves whereas I can tell you and...I said...I just basically said to her, you get on my nerves because you're so nice all the time and I just don't believe somebody can be like that, I just don't believe that, that's normal. And of course, she got really upset and then...and that was exactly what I didn't want to do, so we

just ended up half shouting at each other and she was just really, really upset and I just felt so guilty and I don't think I quite managed to say what I wanted to say. - Do *you* understand what I'm saying now? - [little laugh] I think all I was trying to say was that...I just wish you'd tell me if I got on your nerves or if you didn't want me to do something or...whereas I didn't feel that she was doing. Whereas I suppose you don't, I don't think you do it with anyone do you, [to] be completely honest but I felt that because it was my sister, that you could sort of say...you know...you're being a complete idiot. And I suppose it's hard to say that to someone without upsetting them. But then, I suppose...now, it's a bit better because we do talk about things like that but it's all really good. [...] I think I went through a stage where I felt that she wasn't being honest with me about what she thought I was doing, what I was doing or what she really thought. And I suppose she couldn't win because I suppose if she had been honest I probably would have just...gone spare or something.

Similarly in Chloe and Annabel's *best friendship*, a new kind of talk about emotions which played a vital part in bringing them closer together developed between them in their teens. At the same time, their bond evolved and moved out of the *positioned* discourse into the *shifting positions* discourse. In Chapter VI, talk between Leila and *Annar* led to rapprochement between them in their thirties after years of distance.

In *distant companionship* ties, silence is the more characteristic feature between sisters as illustrated by Rowena's relationship with *Grace* and Clare's with *Stella*. In each case central aspects of their tie remained unspoken - Rowena's jealousy and her sadness at the geographical distance between them, Clare's disability and its construction of difference between them over the decades. Occasionally, the existence of such silences surfaced in the actual interview. The taboo topic of boyfriends was broached in an interview between three teenage sisters, Eve (18), Celia (16) and Amy (13). This embarrassing moment revealed Celia's resentment towards Eve, as the eldest, for never raising this issue, thereby making it impossible for Celia to speak about it or for them to compare notes.

Celia: I do tell Eve a lot about myself, don't I Eve? I mean I will come in and jump and say
Eve: Mm, but I never get it all
MM: You know that
Eve: I know quite well that she's going to stop to ask something, I'll ask a leading question maybe and then she'll shut up
Celia: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, um yeah
Eve: it's very closed
Celia: It's not all my fault, you don't tell me everything either, do you?
Eve: No. [laughs]
Celia: I've never known about any man in your life.

After touching on the intense privacy surrounding hetero/sexuality between them and as the interview drew to a close, they puzzled over its meaning:

> Celia: No, I shall get out and say, god! I wish you'd told me that before, I, really
> Eve: yeah
> Celia: and so you should have. Oh god! It's really really good for our relationships
> Eve: Yeah
> Celia: just to say, ah, I didn't realise you felt like that
> Eve: So tell us about, you know
> Celia: tell me

This acknowledgement of the taboo was restricted to the interview. Eve and Celia recognised their silence explicitly but this exchange was merely an interlude: it did not necessarily mark a new stage in their relationship.

Silence need not have such a potentially disruptive effect. Alice (36) referring to her bonds with her four sisters explains positive silences:

> Alice: [...] so it's just chit chat really, nothing um and sometimes we don't talk at all really because there's nothing to say [laughter] but there is nothing uncomfortable about that silence, it's just, you know, that, that's how it is.

Emotions, talk and silence constitute the 'practices' (Morgan 1996:188) through which sister ties take shape materially. Different experiences of these practices lead to distinct forms of friendship, companionship and feminine subjectivity. The aim of this section was to highlight the intersections between changing subjectivity and these various practices - to illustrate how subjectivity is produced and constructed materially as well as discursively through the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses.

Conclusion

This chapter attempted to draw links between power relations, through the two discourses of the typology - *positioned* and *shifting positions*, changing subjectivity, and the role of emotions, talk and silence. Change in sister relationships takes place through the experience of power relations, emotions and language - what Dorothy Smith (1988) (cited in Stanley and Wise 1990:34) terms 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge'. It is through power, emotions and language that knowledge is obtained by the women, acted upon (movement) or not (immobility), and happily or unhappily possessed. Hence some women feel sad about the knowledge and understanding that they have, and others do not. Chloe and Annabel became best friends after Annabel moved out of the *positioned* discourse. This

change occurred after she became distant from her girlfriend. Could one be in the *positioned* discourse and be best friends? Probably not, as illustrated by the example of the strain which Annabel experienced when she was positioned as Danielle's minder during her best friend's 'break-down'. I argue that these moves in and out of the two discourses occur partly through 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge' or talk/language, and partly through the embodied practice of emotions.

The chapter brings together theoretical aspects of the study regarding the extent to which subjectivity changes within or outside sister relationships. Through comparisons between the four case studies examined I have illustrated the different patterns which can emerge in the relationships between the different types of tie - *best friendship* and *companionship*, feminine subjectivities, and material practices - emotions, talk and silence. The two examples of *best friendship* between Rae and Bukhi, Chloe and Annabel, illustrate agentic change, in this instance connected, respectively, with motherhood and the loss of a boyfriend, and the loss of a girlfriend. In both cases, there is both positive and negative change which is discussed by the sisters. In the two examples of *distant companionship* between Clare and *Stella*, Rowena and *Grace*, changing subjectivity occurs against a background of on-going features in their sister ties - jealousy, geographical separation, physical disability - but principally outside that tie, in other contexts and relationships. The distant companions, although they clearly reflect on their sister tie during the research process, unlike the best friend sisters, are not reflexive about their tie with each other. And they are far less happy in their sister tie than are the sister best friends.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Introduction

In this small exploratory study I have mapped and examined some of the processes that characterise women's accounts of their relationships with their sisters. Here I draw out the main points to emerge from this research. First, I highlight the rationale for this empirical study. Next, I briefly restate the aims and methods adopted. Then I assess the study's contributions to methodological and theoretical debates and summarise the main findings. I reflect on the study more generally, its limitations and themes with potential for further exploration. Finally, I consider future research directions.

1. Rationale

My interest in sister relationships grew out of personal experience as a sister myself, reflections after their deaths on my mother's tie with my aunt, and out of a more general interest in a widespread and influential yet socially invisible and diminished experience. I was also fascinated by the force of the ideal of sisterhood in the women's movement - its hold over the political imagination. Intellectually, I was intrigued by the effects of sister relationships on feminine subjectivity, on its formation within this specific kin and female context. What, I wondered, in the limited context of this study of active sister relationships, were the individual and social effects of growing up as part of this bond? By individual, I meant women's ability through 'agentic subjectivity' to mould their trajectories; by social, I meant the material and discursive conditions defining women's lives. I was also interested in the effect of sister relationships on social structures - an idea that I did not pursue. These were my starting points.

As I carried out the research, I narrowed the scope of my study and focused on the way that feminine subjectivity is constructed and shifts within the sister relationship. I was curious about the possibility of rewriting familial scripts or the ability 'to invent what we desire' (Rich 1995) in the context of a gendered and subordinating structure - kin relationships in nuclear and extended families. I also paid increasing attention to the phenomenon of changing relationships over time as this was one of the most significant findings to emerge. In this sense, the notion of the social in the study became limited to the context of the relationship itself as a familial tie, rather than encompassing a broader landscape. So my gaze remained limited to the social in private rather than public life (Edwards and Ribbens 1998).

2. Summary of aims and methods

The research developed into a study of the construction of feminine subjectivities within sister relationships: a small empirical study of sister ties during girlhood and womanhood using qualitative methods. My aim overall was to explore the experience of 'sistering' through an analysis of the way that sisters who have an active relationship with each other understand its evolution over time. There were four specific aims. One was to explore a small sample of active sister relationships from a sociological perspective in order to produce new knowledge on a neglected aspect of women's lives. This aim was addressed through the development of the four strands of the typology which incorporated concepts of power relations, language and subjectivity.

A second aim was to document the role and effects of the sister tie in relation to a complex web of other familial and sexual relationships, in order to contribute to the sociology of kin and friendship networks. I hoped to highlight a hidden aspect of women's lives in order to ascertain whether the sister tie constituted a form of support, accommodation, survival or resistance in the context of patriarchal and heterosexual sites. I discovered that the sister tie constituted a relationship made up of moments of change and continuity which could provide all of the above and also be itself a site of struggle and conflict.

A third aim was to explore empirically the formation of subjectivity drawing on feminist post-structuralist theory[1]. This was carried out through a detailed focus on the production of subjectivity through emotions, talk and silence, as well as reflexive knowledge. A final aim was to contribute to the methodological literature on researching family relationships and private domestic life (Edwards and Ribbens 1998). Here attention was paid, throughout the thesis, to ethical dilemmas of data collection, analysis and public representation.

These aims, for the purposes of fieldwork, were translated into five research questions (Chapter III). The following five elements of the bond were documented: contact patterns, types of tie, factors affecting these ties, comparisons with female friendship, and changes over time. Data were gathered from 37 women aged between 6 and 50 from a range of class and ethnic backgrounds in various British urban locations. A total of 29 interviews were carried out, individual and paired. A theoretical sample based on age was constituted across six decades, from the pre-teenage years to the fifties. Participants were accessed principally through snowballing. Several methods were developed for collecting the data including a questionnaire, an Ecomap of kin and friendship networks, a Flowchart of life events and turning-points, and a semi-structured depth interview. Both the Ecomap and the Flowchart proved useful for eliciting accounts from teenagers on the one hand, and older

1 See Kenway and Blackmore (1995); Jones (1993); Alcoff (1988); Lather (1988).

women on the other. These two self-complete instruments enabled participants to focus on the research topic in a visual way through the Ecomap, and develop an overview of their relationship over time through the Flowchart.

3. Contribution to methodological debates

Throughout the study, the concern with documenting women's lived experience required particular attention to both methodological issues and the methods adopted. Researching subjectivity in the field and analysing it in the data raised a number of methodological issues and ethical dilemmas. These required careful consideration and included making decisions about the implications of breaking confidentiality, and recognising the parallels for participants and researcher in the act of selecting emotions and episodes from women's lives and relationships for disclosure in the interviews and in the analysis.

These dilemmas of analysis and construction of narratives of relationship (Chapter IV) stem partly from the difficulties of interpreting lives from multiple perspectives and from the web of ties in which women as sisters are involved. One of the main dilemmas was raised by researching a private family relationship. At the most, anonymity rather than confidentiality was offered to both the women who took part and their sisters who appear involuntarily in the study. Another challenge arose from the application of feminist principles of research practice to an empirical study designed according to strands of feminist theory that combined materialist and deconstructionist perspectives for interpreting women's experiences and stories of both subjectivity and 'other', in this case in relationships with their sisters.

One dilemma in the application of feminist principles of research practice to an empirical study concerned the production of feminist knowledge. There was a tension between standpoint theory and deconstruction regarding the knowing subject and the place of experience, emotion, memory and narrative in the construction of knowledge. These all figured in the research process: in relation to the participants in their own lives, the participants and researcher in the interview, and the researcher herself. In my study knowledge was created from the participants' lived experience and emotions, and from the narratives which they produced about these. It was possible to produce knowledge about their changing subjectivity by using the auto/biographical method which brought together the material and discursive approaches emanating from the two discordant theories adopted in the study. This method provided the link through what Smith (1988 cited in Stanley and Wise 1990:34) terms 'written or verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge' or language. Next I examine the contribution this study makes to developments in feminist theory.

4. Contribution to theoretical debates

The conceptual framework adopted in the study stemmed from three bodies of work: feminist standpoint theory, feminist post-structuralism, and auto/biographical work in sociology (Chapter II). Standpoint theory primarily influenced the methodology of the study; auto/biography, my approach to, and method of collecting and analysing the data; and both standpoint theory and post-structuralism, my epistemological and ontological positions. The main influences of standpoint theory concerned ontology, epistemology and methodology. The concepts incorporated in my work deriving from empirical research designed according to standpoint theory were those of *power relations* and *negotiation.*

The main influence of feminist post-structuralism was at the levels of ontology and epistemology in relation to three concepts - power relations, language and subjectivity - used for developing the typology. The centrality of language and *discourse* in constituting 'reality' concerned the level of ontology. At the level of epistemology, the main concept for understanding how knowledge was created from narratives produced by the speaking subject, was *subjectivity*. The notion of *discourse* embraced power relations and language: the context of the study was discourses prevalent in the family. The approach that I adopted is rooted in a triad of power, knowledge and subject in place of the traditional society/individual dualism. *Subjectivity* was understood as changing, made up of desires and emotions yet retaining consistent elements, such as the ability to think rationally (Maynard 1995; Flax 1990): hence 'agentic subjectivity' (Maynard 1995:274) encompassing agency and an ability to act on and in the social world.

The influence of auto/biographical work in sociology was at the level of method in the collection and interpretation of life histories of sister relationships. This auto/biographical method provided a conceptual link between the individual and the social, subjectivity and discourse: it incorporated and wove together changes in individual subjectivity and in changing sister ties. In this sense, auto/biography formed a lynchpin between the descriptive and the analytic strands of the typology. As Morgan says, the strength of this approach enables us to understand the social through changing subjectivities:

> The growing interest in auto/biography shifts the attention away from the categories used to describe collectivities, structures or social institutions and towards a processual understanding of a social actor following a variety of careers or trajectories. [...] we have a fluid sense of a movement through and across a variety of statuses and identities. (Morgan 1996:187-8)

As I draw on two contradictory epistemologies, feminist standpoint theory in the tradition of critical theory and feminist post-structuralism, certain tensions exist. Yet many benefits

emerge from combining these theories with the auto/biographical method for researching women's lives as sisters. One concerns the interpretation of the data. The auto/biographical method brings together the two discordant theories/epistemologies: experience, the material and the emotional on the one hand; subjectivity, discourse and narrative on the other. Another strength concerns the development of theory: my conceptual framework is rooted in a sense of feminist enquiry as 'dialectical [...] with different standpoints fusing to produce new syntheses that in turn become the grounds for further work' (Olesen 1994:169).

This fusion of the two theories with the auto/biographical method allowed the tension between the lived, the material, and its representation through language to be explored. It also enabled the data analysis to hold on to the importance of both the material reality of experience and emotion, and the fact that these exist and are constituted through language and narrative. Language, the production of knowledge, the material and power relations are inextricably linked. In my study, knowledge was produced from experiences *and* narratives.

5. Summary of main findings

The main findings to emerge from this study are the product of the theoretical framework, methodology and methods adopted which together influenced the way that the data were gathered and analysed. The resulting interpretation clearly is not the only possible reading of the material collected: it is one of several potential explorations of sister relationships in keeping with the postmodern project which challenges and rejects 'the lust for authoritative accounts' (Lather 1988:577) in the deconstruction of the 'totalising discourse' (ibid) and the power relations inherent therein. The knowledge generated is drawn from sisters who have active relationships with each other and may have limited relevance for other types of involvement between sisters.

This section summarises the findings in relation to the aims and research questions of the study. One of the aims, to make a methodological contribution, was considered above. The first aim, to document an invisible aspect of women's lives, was addressed by analysing the different types of tie that exist between sisters and the contact patterns between them.

The typology of four strands, developed from the data, in order to analyse the women's narratives captures the different types of tie that exist between women. This typology incorporated concepts of power relations and negotiation, discourse or gendered talk, and subjectivity derived from feminist standpoint theory, feminist post-structuralism, as well as the data. In the thesis, the development of the research aims and questions, theoretical

framework and concepts for interpreting the data - incorporated into the typology - stemmed from the existing empirical literature on kinship and friendship, theoretical work on gender and researching women's lives, as well as the analysed data. The data were analysed through case studies, the auto/biographical method and grounded theory (Chapter IV).

The four strands of the typology included: *best friendship*, *close* and *distant companionship*, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. The descriptive tools of the *best friendship* and *companionship* strands were used for categorising the different forms that sister relationships take. The more analytical tools, the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses, were used for conceptualising power relations and changing subjectivity. The four strands of the typology can permeate each other and coexist within one relationship as sisters move from one to another at a single moment in time or over decades.

Contact patterns between sisters were associated with forms of female friendship: some ties recalled the intensity of *best friendship*; others, the positive and negative aspects of distance and separateness of *close* and *distant companionship* (Chapter V). Fourteen women out of the 37 interviewed described their tie with their sister as one of *best friendship*, thirteen considered it to be one of *close companionship*, and ten, one of *distant companionship*. The frequency and type of contact between the women was linked to the quality of their talk and interaction, the extent of mutual confiding and whether or not they regarded each other as close friends (Connidis 1989). Geographical proximity, mothering and marital status were also important factors.

The second aim was to contribute to the sociology of kin and friendship networks. This was achieved through an analysis of changes over time in sister ties, the factors affecting these ties, and differences and similarities between these ties and other forms of female friendship. A significant finding was the evolution of the sister bond over time, moving from *best friendship* during girlhood to *companionship* in womanhood, or vice-versa. This type of change was connected to circumstances external to the relationships. Changing patterns of dependence and independence in the relationships were triggered by turning-points and life events: for example, changing school, acquiring and losing girlfriends and boyfriends, leaving home, starting work, mothering, bereavement and divorce (Chapter VI). The main factors here in the process of changing relationships over time were age and life-stage. The role of shifting power relations, an additional factor, is considered below.

A further way in which the study sheds light on the practices and meanings of kin and friendship is by drawing an analogy during the data collection and analysis stages between the different types of sister ties and distinct forms of female friendship. One finding about the differences and similarities between these kin and non-kin bonds relates to parallels between kinship and friendship in terms of their defining features: contact patterns, and the material production of subjectivity through emotions, talk and silence. The obligations and expectations in kinship and friendship appear similar, as are the importance of voluntary and dutiful elements in constructing and maintaining interpersonal bonds (Hey 1997).

Several women highlighted the way that 'sisterly' bonds which they enjoyed with cousins, sisters-in-law and girlfriends became substitutes for sister relationships (Chapter VIII). Carmen (47) who formed an intimate bond of *best friendship* with her now deceased sister-in-law Ellen said: 'I was more closer to her than I was to my sister. With her, I, we, I could talk anything, from..... headache, period, and men, so it didn't matter. But to my sister I can't talk liberally.' Carmen's possessiveness and longing for Ellen were reminiscent of those of a lover:

> Carmen: something I never tell, I, I even went before they close of the coffin, I want to be the last one to kiss her...you know...because it, I felt possessive, I didn't want anybody to be the last one... It's terrible, I didn't want even my brother to be the last one to, you know. I wanted to be the last one to say good-bye... It's very, very odd, very very odd, but...

Carmen's feelings for her sister-in-law shed light on the way that ties with non-biological women can take on qualities of sister ties. This phenomenon, in the case of non-kin, is described as 'fictive families' or 'going for kin' (Stack 1974; Giallombardo 1966). These expressions suggest that aspects of the sister relationship can be replicated with other women and that strength of emotional feeling is socially constructed rather than biologically founded.

A third aim of the study was to explore subjectivity empirically. Subjectivity was defined as embedded in emotions, change and positionality through shifting power relations. Power relations were examined through the two more analytical strands of the typology: the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses. The *positioned* discourse tends to reproduce specific traits of mother-daughter relationships, especially minimothering, and the *shifting positions* discourse corresponds to the occurrence of role reversals (Chapter VII). The *positioned* discourse contains elements of a hegemonic relationship of dominance and subordination. The *shifting positions* discourse, however, is based on a flexible notion of dominance: women can change positions and, alternately, be dominant, dominated, or more

equal. In the last chapter, the role of 'agentic subjectivity' was highlighted in the move in and out of the two discourses. Clearly, it would be interesting to look at these two discourses further, in particular the way that they may reinforce or destabilise the notion of hierarchy as an 'ordering principle' (Meese 1986:85 cited in Lather 1988).

The role of subjectivity in the changes that occur within sister relationships - through turning-points and life-events leading to transitions - was highlighted in this analysis. Internally, change in the ties can happen with movement in or out of the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses through agentic subjectivity. Specific attention was paid to subjectivity in order to map its formation and transformation. Subjectivity was conceptualised as 'a conjunction of diverse social practices produced and positioned socially, without an underlying essence' (Lather 1988:577). A significant finding was that agentic subjectivity can change within or outside the sister tie (Chapter VIII). Women who enjoyed *best friendship* ties with their sister were more likely to see their subjectivity develop within the tie, whereas women with *distant companionships* were more likely to develop their subjectivity in the context of other kin or non-kin bonds.

My work adds to other substantive sociological research on family life and power dynamics in the household within and across generations and throughout the life-stage (McNamee 1997; Adkins and Leonard 1993). It also adds to our understanding of a same-sex tie: the focus on emotions, power relations and formations of subjectivity within the tie make the findings relevant for exploring other socially invisible personal relationships and support networks (Heaphy *et al.* 1997; Weeks *et al.* 1997). It may also be relevant for exploring ties between brothers in their private and domestic lives.

6. Limitations and possibilities

I have drawn links between the research questions and the study's main findings. A crucial finding was the role of power relations and changing subjectivity in transforming, or not, the sister tie. Here I outline limitations in the research, including absences, themes that would benefit from further investigation, and weaknesses which emerged in the analysis, which could be rectified in any future investigation. There are certain types of relationships and women likely to be under-represented in the study: women who have difficult or conflictual relationships, and non-white, working-class and non-heterosexual women. A number of elements of sister relationships were not considered: for example, the effect of not having a sister; inactive sister ties; non-biological or step sister relationships.

A number of themes which surfaced during the data analysis yet were not examined in depth would merit further attention: first, the role of socio-demographic factors, especially

class and ethnicity, and cultural difference; second, the role of brothers in sisters' lives; and third, the production of subjectivity through the body, talk about the body, and heterosexuality. Socio-demographic factors such as class and ethnicity could have provided rich insights into cultural differences in sisters ties: these are merely hinted at through some case studies - Zoe and Sofia, and Lauren and her sisters (Chapter V).

A theme that was important though not central in my account was the role, both positive and negative, of brothers in women's lives, and the effect of sister-brother ties in shaping sister relationships, mentioned by several participants. Positive effects included the support provided by brothers; negative elements included rivalry and brothers' lack of involvement in kin work or the maintenance of ties. Moreover, interesting material from my data on the body and health, and on gender and managing heterosexuality remains to be further explored. Data on the extent to which sisters discuss their bodies and reproductive health from the teenage years into womanhood reveal diverse patterns. Fruitful analysis here would contribute to the debate about emotions and the body as legitimate sources of knowledge (Hey 1997; Maynard 1994). Although heterosexuality was considered implicitly, in terms of power relations in the *positioned* and *shifting positions* discourses, the way that women's sexual relationships constrict or strengthen their ties with their sisters could be examined further. This question is hinted at in Leila's relationship with *Annar*, and Roxanne's with Madonna (Chapter VI). The theme concerning sisters' discussion of health and reproductive issues could be usefully followed up and related to current debates about women's sexual health.

Another aspect that could have been further pursued was the women's reactions and feelings about their changing subjectivity and changing relationships with their sisters. There was a distinction between their feelings regarding their subjectivity and regarding the sister tie, although this has not been the focus of the thesis. Some women were happy with or accepting of their sister ties and yet grappling with their own subjectivity: Bukhi recovering from her split with her boyfriend, for example, Alice ambivalent about her singledom, Jeanne anxious about not wanting to 'mother' or be 'mothered'. Jeanne was struggling with her subjectivity and yet accepting of her complex and difficult ties with her sisters. For Jeanne's sisters Madonna and Roxanne, however, it was the opposite - they felt happy with their subjectivity and less happy with some of their sister ties. Some women were uncertain about both their subjectivity and their sister tie: Beth, for example, had mixed feelings about her location in the *positioned* discourse and wanted to feel closer to Louise. Other women, however, were happy with both their subjectivity and their sister tie, for example, Hazel and Phoebe, Rae, Leila, Leonie, Suzanne, and Louise.

Some weaknesses in relation to study design and methods remain and this research could have been improved in several ways. There are many alternative research designs which could have been used to explore sister relationships. An in-depth examination of relationships among women from a single decade could be carried out with women in their thirties or forties, after the flux of the teens and twenties. Alternative methods could be used, for example, focus groups with larger numbers of women followed by repeat interviews with a sub-sample over a period of time. These multiple interviews would contribute to a longitudinal and more ethnographic approach: three interviews conducted over a period of 18 months at six-month intervals, for example, would allow the effect of the interview on the relationship to be examined, a dimension absent from the current study. Although repeated interviewing multiplies interview effect, the researcher could document women's perceptions of changes in their sister ties from one interview to the next and the relationship itself could be traced over a longer period. A follow-up project to the current study might consist of revisiting some women, sharing findings and exploring changes in their relationships since their initial involvement.

7. Future research directions

This section considers the implications of the findings from this research for three other areas: health promotion, social and welfare research, and developments in theorising feminist politics. Interventions in specific areas of health promotion, social and welfare research have incorporated and applied ideas about sister relationships in an attempt to produce and recreate aspects of the tie in specific social contexts. Illman (1993), for example, describes the diffusion in a Thai community of a soap opera about sisters and their husbands as a means of transmitting messages about AIDS and safer sex. In the United States, elements of the sister tie and sibling bond have been applied to social and welfare programmes including the use of 'buddying'. Models of 'sisterly relationships' used in peer and social support interventions among non-kin include Big/Little Sisters/Brothers and Resource Sisters/Compañeras projects for children, teenagers and pregnant women (Lugo 1996). In Seidl's (1982) work, pairing up 'big' and 'little' 'sisters' was shown to influence girls' behaviour. Studies employing these notions targeting boys and girls have aimed to modify their home and school behaviour, while others have promoted nurturing and empathy among gay men (Frecknall and Luks 1992; Whitehead and Nokes 1990). The current study provides insights into the sister tie which could be utilised in such interventions.

The recreation of a familial tie in a social setting raises an important question about its construction as both biological and social. Implicitly, the position which I adopted in the thesis was to examine the sister tie as a socially constructed bond in order to understand its

formation and evolution. The biological connection can be significant, especially, for example, in relation to hereditary diseases. However, full discussion of the biological *and* social construction of the tie lies beyond the scope of the thesis. This particular issue is now being fiercely debated in the context of work on the sociology of the emotions, the body, health and illness (Bendelow and Williams 1998).

I have highlighted the significance of the social dimension of the sister tie in the context of health promotion, social and welfare work. This concluding chapter ends with a reflection on the political elements of the tie. How has this tie been appropriated and idealised in the political context of the women's movement, through the notion of sisterhood? What are the links between private 'sisterhood', a notion whose qualities are both invoked and yet decried as oppressive, and its public form in the sphere of feminist politics? I want to suggest that it is potentially possible to bridge gaps and divides of difference and power inequalities in both the private experience of sistering and the public sphere of the politics of feminism through similar processes. I want to explore how bonds can be created across differences in feminist politics, similarly as for relationships based on biological ties - by acknowledging these differences, voicing them and working with them.

Turning from 'sisters in private' to 'political sisters',[2] I consider the use of terms connected to the sister tie and friendship as metaphors of political solidarity. The trawl through this terminology reveals a fascination with the power of associations around *sister* to connote women united in spite of their differences. For example, Lugones and Rosezelle (1995) explore the terms *hermana*, *compañera* and *sister*. The Spanish *hermana* or sister conveys the sympathy and practical support offered by siblings and close friends, *compañera* or comrade suggests egalitarian companionship in political struggle and partnership, and *sister* also has a political resonance. It is used in a religious context and denotes a constructed familial and political tie based on race not blood in the history of resistance to slavery in the African American community. In the white Anglo context, it refers to an egalitarian kinship tie of bonding, trust, affection and reciprocity - possibly an attempt to recreate the support networks of some black kinship groups. These distinctions indicate the varied political meanings of *sister*.

Yet friendship potentially offers a more realistic political metaphor of women's solidarity than sisterhood. *Pluralist friendship* suggests the possibility of women bonding across differences and committed to 'perceptual changes' in the knowledge of the other (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995:141). This utopian vision, of neither an institutional, legal or

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2 Gordon (1994) uses the expression 'political sisters' in her compelling historical portrait of a group of girlfriends in pre Second Wave Feminism 1950s white South Africa.

unconditional bond, can encompass plural realities and selves who are differently positioned, yet is difficult to sustain in practice. A more attainable goal is that of *compañerismo*, or 'comradeliness' which captures more successfully the importance of acknowledging difference in the political realm than do images of sisters, sistering or sisterhood. Perhaps this goal is also relevant for the private lives of women and their sisters.

As I argued in Chapter VIII, overcoming differences through 'verbal bodies of acknowledged knowledge' (Stanley and Wise 1990:34) is the key element in both the private lived reality of sister ties and in the public arena of political sisterhood. Other feminists have also abandoned the notion of a female 'nirvana' (Hey 1997:126). Although Hey recognises that girlfriendship provides some form of escape from invisibility in the male institution of school and schooling, she 'ultimately refuses the notion of a 'better' because 'feminine' culture by attending to the real material difficulties and differences which girls' relations articulate' (Hey 1997:36). For 'the difficulty for girls', Hey continues, 'is that of seeking out empowering places within regimes alternately committed to denying subordination or celebrating it' (Hey 1997:132).

What the current study examined is the possibility for shifting feminine subjectivities to emerge in and outside sister relationships, both a confining and a supportive space. The focus on agentic subjectivity in the context of changing ties aimed to show how women grapple with the contradictory discourses around sistering: '...they invest in some, reject others, create their own meanings for the choices they make, and position themselves in hierarchies' (Usher 1996:140). This is what I explored empirically through mapping a neglected social relationship, its culture and preeminence as a repository of feminine subjectivity.

Table 7: Characteristics of the sample

Women	Adrienne	Alice	Amy	Annabel	Anne	Beth	Bukhi	Carmen	Celia
Age	12	36	13	20	38	27	25	47	16
Ethnicity Nationality	White English	Black British Caribbean	White English	White English	White Irish	White Scottish	Black Asian British	Black Cuban	White English
Class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Working class	Middle class
Education	Secondary school	BSc.	Secondary school	A-levels	BA	BSc. Phd p.t.	A-levels	HND	Studying for GCSEs
Occupation	School pupil	Accountant	School pupil	Studying Bsc. Degree	Writer	Trainee dentist	Studying BA Degree P.T. work	Mother Secretary & P.A.	School pupil

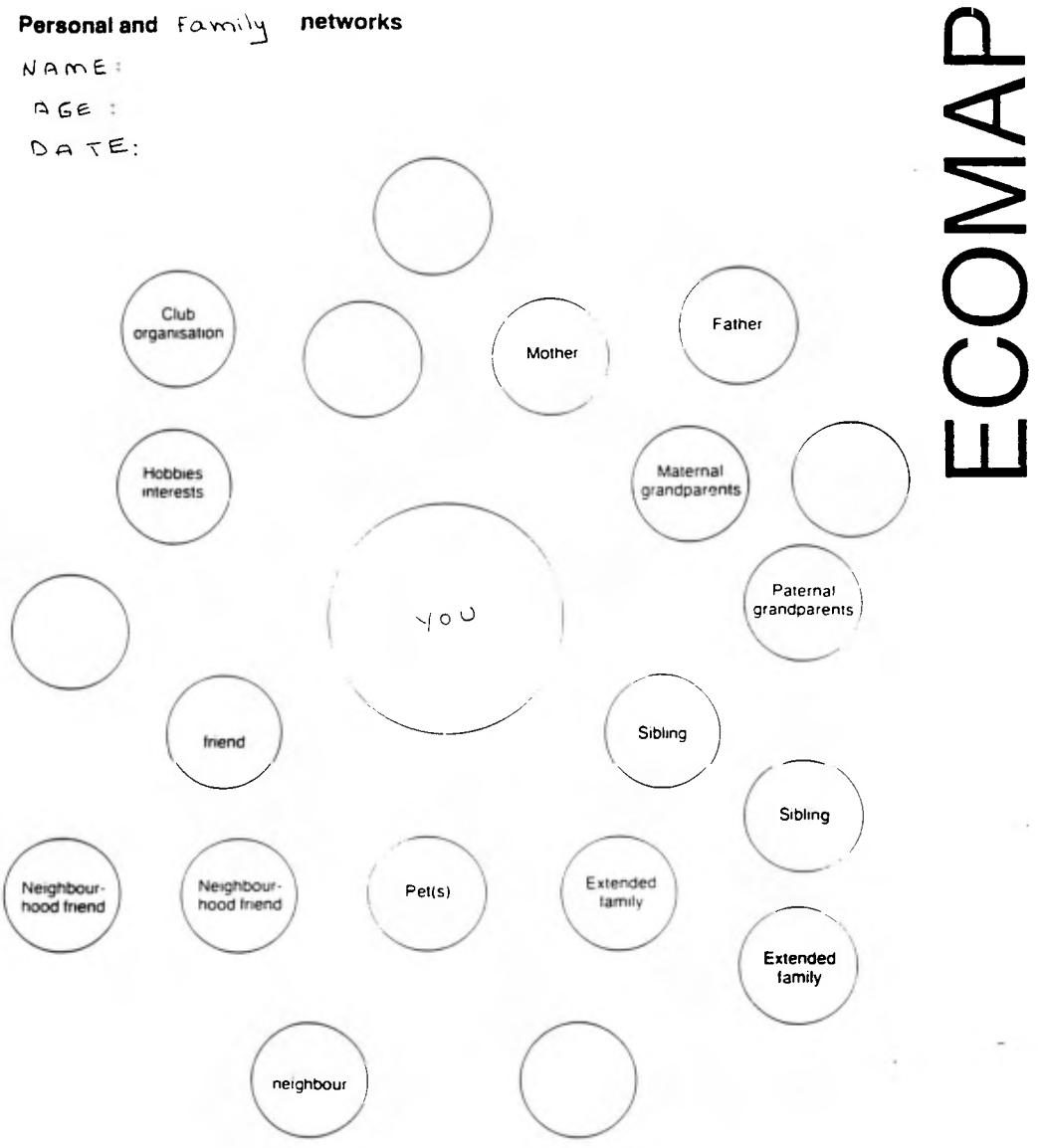
Women	Chloe	Clare	Eliza	Eve	Flora	Frieda	Hazel	Hilda	Isabel
Age	20	50	38	18	40	24	34	9	6
Ethnicity Nationality	White English	White Scottish	Black British Caribbean	White English	White Irish	White English	White English	White English	White English
Class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Working class	Middle class	Middle class
Education	A-levels	BA	BA	A-levels	MA	Nursing qualification	Trained as beautician	Primary school	Primary school
Occupation	Trainee midwife	Journalist	Mother Accountant	Gap year travel & work prior to BA	Mother Theatre director	Trainee nurse	Mother Studying GCSEs P.T.	School pupil	School pupil

Women	Jeanne	Judith	Lauren	Leila	Leonie	Louise	Madonna	Mildred	Nicole
Age	45	16	37	40	48	22	31	26	10
Ethnicity Nationality	White British	White English	White Welsh	Black Indian	White British	White Scottish	White British	White English	White English
Class	Middle class	Working class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Working class
Education	BSc.	Studying for GCSEs	BA	BSc.	Left school at 15	BA	BA	BA	Primary school
Occupation	Mother Doctor/GP	School pupil P.T. work	Mother Solicitor	Optician	Mother Seamstress	Gap year travel & work post BA	Training to be a singer	Arts administrator	School pupil

Women	Phoebe	Rae	Revi	Rosemary	Rowena	Roxanne	Sofia	Suzanne	Vandana	Zoe
Age	35	30	21	30	37	39	16	29	25	17
Ethnicity Nationality	White English	Black Asian British	Black Pakistani	Black British Caribbean	White English	White British	Black Asian British	White English	Black Pakistani	Black Asian British
Class	Working class	Middle class	Working class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Working class	Working class	Working class	Working class
Education	Trained as health visitor	MA	Secondary School	Physio-therapy Diploma	BSc.	MA	Just took GCSEs	Left school at 16	Secondary School	GCSEs
Occupation	Mother Playgroup leader	Mother Decorator Sculptor	Mother Learning ESL	Physio-therapist	Management consultant	Mother FE College Lecturer	Studying A-levels	Mother	Mother P.T. FE student	Studying at FE College

Appendix II

Ecomap

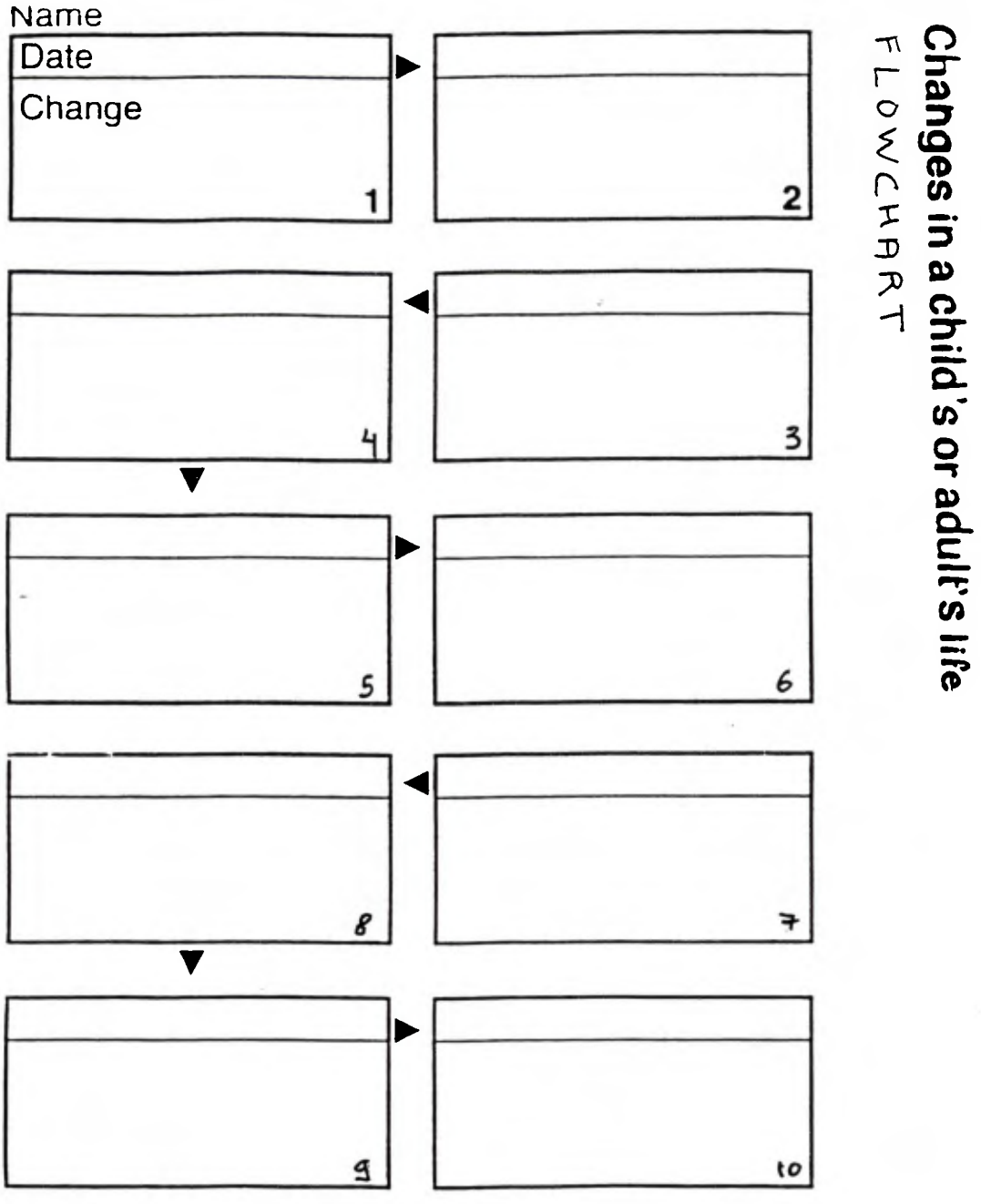


- Place YOURSELF in central circle
- Identify important people or organisations and draw circles as needed.
- Draw lines between circles where connections exist.
- Use different types of lines to indicate the nature of the link or relationship:

—— = strong for example, you get on, you talk together, you are intimate
----- = weak you don't have much in common, you don't talk a lot, sociable
//////// = stressful for example, a tense a difficult relationship

Appendix III

Changes in a Child's or Adult's Life: Flowchart



Some changes you might like to consider:

- the birth of your sister
- when you or your sister(s) went to a new or the same school
- the impact of a boyfriend/girlfriend on your relationship with your sister(s)
- when you or she left home, started work
- events that brought you together or distanced you
- events that changed patterns of dependence or independence between you

Appendix IV

Sister Relationships: Interview Guide

There are several things that I am interested in:
• how your relationship has changed as you have become older
• the difference between your relationship with your sister/s and your friends/best friend
• how you keep in touch
• the kind of relationship you have
• what this depends on: your age, the age gap between you, where you live, life events (marriage, motherhood, bereavement)

Your sisters, your family and you
School years
Age difference
Rivalry
Contact
Expectations
Significant events in your relationship
Sisters and friends
Talk
Body talk
Reflecting back
Appreciation
Feedback: Talking about your relationship with me

Your sisters, your family and you
access process if relevant, other sisters' descriptions
Why did you want to take part in the study?
Can you tell me a bit about your family?
Can you tell me a bit about your sisters?
Can you tell me a bit about you and them?
What kind of relationship do you have with them?

School years
birth of your younger sister/s
relationship when growing up
same or a different school
teasing
friends
body changes: spots, deodorant, 'growing out', figure, appearance, periods
'fancying' boys and boyfriends

Age difference
How important has the age gap been in your relationships?
Prompts: 'going out'
looking after younger siblings
role models
Do you mind being the older, younger, middle one?
Do you get on better with one of your sisters? Why?
Does the age gap make less difference as you get older?
How influenced have you been by your sisters?
Prompts: successes
mistakes

Rivalry
in the past/now
competitiveness
rivalry (ability, appearance)
jealousy
age difference, bossy one
conflict
anger, upset each other, how do you patch it up
resentments
reconciliation

Contact
phonecalls
letters, card, presents
visits
drop-in
making arrangements
visits (alone, with husbands, with children)
your feelings about the visits/contact
husband and children's feelings
time together (shopping, holidays, talk)
what is it like (laugh, bored, sociable, intimate, tense)
how long
how often
negotiation process
initiative process
responsibility
How do you pick up where you left off if there has been a long gap?
Do you miss each other?
Are you physically affectionate?

Expectations
Do you see each other out of pleasure or duty?
Do you have obligations to each other?
Are there any rules in your relationship, spoken or unspoken?
Do you help each other out?
Prompts: practical help
childcare
advice
money
health decisions
work
with other family relationships
in times of crisis: pregnancy, marital problems
Is it mutual?
Have there been disappointments? EXAMPLE
How did you deal with this?

Significant events in your relationship
What have been the turning points in your relationship?
Can you think of any incidents which affected your relationship significantly?
Can you think of events in your sister/s' life/lives?
Can you think of events in your own life?
How important have these events been in your relationships with your sisters?
Prompts: birth of your sisters/siblings
changing schools
leaving school
leaving home
starting college, starting work
having boyfriends
moving
marriage
motherhood
divorce
step-families
bereavement
How has [ ] changed your relationship?

Sisters and friends
Can you tell me a bit about your friends?
Can you tell me a bit about your friendships?
How is your relationship with your sister the same or different than your female friendships?
Prompts: what you talk about
advice
affection

Talk

Has what you talk about changed over the years/decades?
Are there some things you tend not to talk about?
Do you confide in each other?
Prompts: relationships, sexual identity, sex, money, family relationships
Do you share problems, worries, stress?
Who else do you talk to?
Are there any differences between talking with your sister and your friends?
Can you think of areas you can talk about with your sister that you can't talk about with your best friend or husband?
And vice-versa: with your best friend or husband but not with your sister/s?
What affect do your talks usually have on you?

Body talk

Do you ever talk about personal issues to do with the body or health?
Did you learn or tell anything about the body from your sister?
Did you talk about sex or periods when you were growing up? (periods, pads)
Where did you first learn about sex? How old were you?

Reflecting back

Can you describe how your relationship has changed over the years?
What was it like in the past?

Appreciation

What is your relationship like now? (ask WHY and ask for EXAMPLES)
Prompts: special person, why
How do you feel about your relationships with your sisters as they are now?
Is there anything you would like to be different?
Do you have any regrets?
Do you have any hopes when you look ahead?
What does being a sister mean to you?
What are the things you value in your relationship with your sister and your friends?
Prompts: knowing she is there
someone to talk to
trust
reliability
companionship
fun
share sadness
be yourself
commitment
How important is she, is your relationship with her/them?

Feedback: Talking about your relationship with me

How do you feel about talking about your relationship?
How do you feel about taking part in this study?
Is there anything that you would like to add?
Is there anything you want to ask me?
Would you like some information on the results of the study?

Appendix V

Questionnaire

Demographic Information

Name: Age:

Date of Interview: Place of Interview:

Your occupation (FT, PT, homemaker):

Your most recent form of employment:

Education and training: GCSEs O-levels Left school at: A-levels

HND Diploma BA Postgrad Other

Type of school you go to:

Other training, college, courses or studying you have done/are doing:

Names, ages, place of residence, status and occupations of your sister/s and brothers:

Family status: single cohabiting married separated divorced other

Name, age and occupation of your husband/partner:

Names and ages of your children/parents (occupation):

Your ethnicity: White UK White Irish White European Black Afro-Caribbean

Black Indian Black Pakistani Black Bangladeshi

Black African Chinese Other:

Your religion: Christian Jewish Muslim Hindu Sikh Buddhist Other:

What language(s) do you speak at home?

Appendix VI

Information Sheet

SISTERS' RELATIONSHIPS - A PHD RESEARCH PROJECT

Aim of the project

The project is about women's relationships with their sisters at different stages of life: as teenagers, in their twenties, thirties and forties. The aim is to explore how these relationships change over the years and how they are similar or different than friendships with other women. I am interested in three things: how sisters keep in touch; the different kinds of relationships that they have; and what this depends on - for instance, their age and the age gap between them, where they live, the impact of family and life events, etc.

How will the project be done?

I will be talking to about 40 sets of sisters - 10 from each decade. Some women I'll talk to alone; others, with their sister(s). It depends on your own preference. I am also going to arrange some informal group discussions with 6-8 women who have sisters to find out what issues are important in each decade.

How much time is involved?

It depends on whether you want to talk to me on your own or with your sister(s). If you are alone it will take about two hours, if you are with your sister(s), it will take a bit longer.

What about confidentiality?

Everything you say about yourself, your sister(s) and your relationship is confidential. The information you provide will only be used by me for this study. All the names will be changed and any personal details disguised when I write up the final report.

Feedback

You might like to receive a summary of the main findings when the study has been completed.

The researcher

I am carrying out this research for my Phd in sociology at the Institute of Education, London University. I have worked on a number of other projects about families, mothers and children and their experiences of health and welfare. I am currently researching the way that families talk about health issues for the Health Education Authority's national *Family Health Research Programme.*

Further information

If you want any further information or want to ask me about the project you can phone me on 071 612 6095 or 071 612 6397 (answermachine). You can also contact me at: SSRU, 18 Woburn Square, Institute of Education, London University, London WC1H 0NS.

Appendix VII

Availability Sheet

SISTERS' RELATIONSHIPS - A PHD RESEARCH PROJECT

Please complete and delete as appropriate:

I would /would not like to take part in the research project on sisters' relationships.

Name:

Age:

Address:

Telephone number:

Sister(s)'s name(s) and age(s):

I prefer to talk to you about my relationship with my sister(s) alone
with her

I prefer to talk to you: at home
at some other place to be arranged

The best time for you to talk to me/us is: in the morning
in the after-noon
in the evening
at the week-end

I do not want to take part in the study because:

Please return to: Melanie Mauthner, SSRU, 18 Woburn Square, London WC1H ONS.

Appendix VIII

Confirmation Letter

1994

Dear

Re: Sisters' Relationships - a Phd Research Project

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study.

Following our recent phone conversation, I am writing to confirm that I will be coming to interview you about your relationship with your sister(s) at

on

at

I will bring an information sheet about the study and answer any questions you have. The interview will last approximately 2-3 hours.

If you would like to change the day or the time please could you let me know as soon as possible.

You can contact me in the day on **071 612 6095**.

In the evening you can leave a message on **071 733 0426**.

Thank you for all your help.

Yours sincerely,

Melanie Mauthner

Appendix IX

Interview With Sisters: Introductory Comments

1. Thank you

Thank you for completing the questionnaire and for offering to take part in this study.

2. The research project

I am carrying out this research for my Phd in sociology at the Institute of Education.
As I explain in the sheet I gave you, the study is about sisters' relationships.

3. The interview

There are several things that I am interested in:

- how your relationship has changed as you have become older
- the difference between your relationship with your sister/s and your friends/best friend
- how you keep in touch
- the kind of relationship you have
- what this depends on: your age, the age gap between you, where you live, life events (marriage, motherhood, bereavement)

I'd like the interview to have quite a loose structure and be more like a discussion.
If there are any questions you don't understand or would prefer not to answer, or if you would like to stop the interview, please tell me.

Establish how much time there is.

Is there anything you want to ask me about the research project?

4. Confidentiality

As I mention in the sheet I gave you about the project, everything you tell me in the questionnaire and the interview will be confidential. No one will have access to, or listen to, the tapes, and no names will appear in the final report.

5. Tape recorder

Would you mind if I use a tape recorder to tape the interview?

Appendix X

Thank You Letter

1994

Dear

Re: Sisters' Relationships - a Phd Research Project

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study and for talking to me recently about your relationship with your sister. It has been very helpful for my Phd research.

I will be in touch as the study progresses to let you know what is happening. I hope you don't mind if I contact you again in the next few months in case there is any more information I need for the project.

As I mentioned when I came to see you, I will send you some information about the results of the study when it is finished.

If you need to contact me you can phone me in the day on 071 612 6095 or in the evening on 071 733 0426.

Thank you for all your help.

Yours sincerely,

Melanie Mauthner

Appendix XI

Summaries of the Participants' Stories

TEENAGE SISTERS

Hilda (9) and Adrienne (12)

I spoke to Hilda and Adrienne together. They live in a town with their cat and their mother who is single, a mature student who also works part-time. Hilda goes to a small girls' primary school. Adrienne until recently attended a local state school and is about to go to an independent secondary school.The important people and relationships they refer to are: Hilda's best friend Gwen, her ex-best friend Juliette, and her special friends. One of Adrienne's ex-best friends is Sultan, her other friends are Hilary and Lamia. Their 'mutual people' include two different sets of cousins. Their relationship is one of *close companionship* with elements of *best friendship*. They are white and middle class.

Judith (16) and Nicole (10)

Judith and Nicole spoke to me together. They live in a city with their parents who both work full-time. The sisters attend different schools and have distinct social networks. They enjoy different leisure activities and do few of them together. Nicole is more lively than her older sister. Judith has a Saturday job and is studying for GCSEs. They argue frequently and talk openly about the differences between them. They do not have a confiding relationship partly, in their eyes, owing to the age gap. Their relationship is one of *distant companionship*. They are white and working class.

Eve (18), Celia (16), Amy (13) and Isabel (6)

I spoke to the three elder sisters together and Isabel, separately. They live in a town with their parents apart from Eve, the eldest, who has recently left home to work in another city. Eve is about to study for a degree and her younger sisters are at school. Their parents both work in local government. The sisters pursue sporting and musical activities. Important people in their network include grand-parents, cousins, neighbours and school friends. The ties between them are of *close companionship*. They are white and middle class.

Zoe (17), Sofia (16) and Gita (9)

Zoe and Sofia are the eldest daughters in an Asian family of three sisters, their younger sister *Gita* is 9. I interviewed them together at home and Zoe had a tendency to dominate and talk more than Sofia. They live in an Asian neighbourhood of the city with their parents and *Gita*: their mother was a nurse, and their father is an artist. Zoe is at college doing a business course and Sofia is studying for A-levels. They are both single. The important people in their lives include their parents and their friends. They are close to their cousin-brother Ranjeet (21) and cousin-sister Manjeet (17) who are the same age as them and live in another city. Zoe and Sofia's relationship is one of *best friendship*. They are black and working class.

SISTERS IN THEIR TWENTIES

Chloe (20) and Annabel (20); Vicki (29) and Gemma (28)

Chloe and Annabel are twins, the youngest sisters in a family of four girls. I interviewed them together in one of their older sisters' homes. Chloe is training to be a midwife and Annabel is studying for a degree. Now that they live in two different parts of the country they see each other far less than they used to. They are both currently single. The important people in their lives include their two older sisters *Vicki* (29) and *Gemma* (28) who live in other cities, Annabel's ex-best friend Danielle (who was a year older than her), Chloe's best friend Medina and a mutual friend of theirs - Emily whose mother died when they were at school. Annabel has got a handful of friends in different circles. The men in their lives include Louis, Annabel's most recent ex-boyfriend, and Paul and Robert, Chloe's most recent ex-boyfriends. Their relationship is one of *best friendship*. They are white and middle class.

Revi (21), Vandana (25) and Shari (17)

I interviewed Revi and Vandana together at Revi's house. They are the eldest in a Pakistani family of five siblings. Their younger sister *Shari* aged 17, two brothers and parents live in the Middle-East. Revi and Vandana are both married to Asian men who have lived in the UK for over a decade and who work full-time. The sisters have been living in the UK for three and two years respectively. Each has a child under 2. They live in two different neighbourhoods of the same city. Revi is a full-time mother and home-maker and lives with her husband and child. Vandana is studying part-time at a local college and lives with her husband and in-laws in an extended family. The important people in their lives are their children, husbands, their sister back home and a few girlfriends. They are *best friends*. They are black and working class.

Beth (27) and Louise (22)

I spoke to Beth first and Louise several months later. Louise travelled south and I interviewed her at Beth's where she was over-nighting. The sisters live in different cities: Louise in the north and Beth in the south. Louise has just completed her degree and Beth is training to be a dentist. Their parents are Scottish though the family home is in the north of England. Their brother Colin (24) is temporarily living with Beth and her partner. Louise lives with her boyfriend. Their relationship is one of *distant companionship*. The sisters are white, of working class-origin and middle class.

Mildred (26), Frieda (24), Jane (21), May (19) and Sarah (18)

Mildred and Frieda are the eldest in a family of five siblings. Their sisters, in their late teens and early twenties and all students, live in different cities. They are a closely-knit family, see each other all regularly at family reunions at home with their parents. I interviewed them together in the house they share with two men. Mildred is single and Frieda has a boyfriend, Philip. Mildred is an arts administrator and Frieda is training to be a nurse. Mildred and Frieda describe their relationship as one of *best friendship*. They are white and middle class.

Suzanne (29) and Collette (25)

I interviewed Suzanne alone and not her sister. She lives with her partner Frank and two young daughters, Juliet, aged 5 and Helen, two and a half. She is a full-time mother and her partner works full-time as a builder. Her sister *Collette* lives in the same neighbourhood and they have almost daily contact. *Collette* used to work in a community centre and now works with her mother, who also lives locally, in a cafe. She is a single mother and has a 10 year-old son, Tristan, and a boyfriend. Suzanne plans to embark on a training course for women to become a gardener. The other important person in Suzanne's social network is her mother. Her father died when she was a teenager. After a turbulent relationship with *Collette* when they were teenagers, they are now *best friends*. She is white and working class.

Rae (30), Bukhi (25) and Mira (22)

I interviewed Rae first and later her sister Bukhi although their preference was to talk to me together. Rae is the oldest in a family of four siblings. Rae and Bukhi live in different areas of the same city after having moved away from their home town where their parents and siblings still live. They are less close to their brother San (29), married with two children, and their sister *Mira* (22) who lives with her parents in the family home. *Mira* has just completed a degree, works part-time and has a boyfriend Ricky. Bukhi feels sad that she and *Mira* are less close than they used to be when Bukhi still lived at home. Rae is married

and has a one year-old daughter, Sasha. She is a decorator and a sculptor. Bukhi is a mature student studying for a degree: she also works part-time and lives with her best friend Nina and Nina's husband. When Bukhi moved to the same city as Rae she lived with Rae and her family for six months before finding a place of her own. Their relationship is one of *best friendship*. They are Asian of mixed parentage and middle class.

SISTERS IN THEIR THIRTIES

Hazel (34) and Phoebe (35)

I interviewed Hazel and Phoebe separately. They live in different cities in the same part of the country an hour away from each other. Phoebe trained as a health visitor and works as a play-group leader. She is married, with two children (6 and 8) and pregnant. Hazel trained as a beautician, is a mature student studying for GCSEs and planning to do a degree. She is divorced and lives with her new partner and three children from her marriage (6, 11, 14). She described herself as a housewife/part-time student. Phoebe is the eldest of four: their brother Oliver is 30 and their younger sister *Denise* died tragically at the age of 19. Oliver and their mother, who lives with her third husband, live five minutes away from Phoebe. Phoebe and Hazel's father left the family when they were toddlers for another continent and their step-father (and father of the two younger children) died when they were children. Their mother raised the family single-handed. The sisters see each other with their children and at family gatherings, rarely as a twosome. They speak regularly on the phone (every fortnight) not out of duty, just to see how the other is. They take the train to visit each other as neither has easy access to a car. Phoebe has more frequent contact with their mother than Hazel. Their relationship is one of *best friendship* with elements of *close companionship*. They are white and working class.

Rowena (37) and Grace (34)

I spoke to Rowena alone. *Grace* works in Alaska where she has lived for the last decade. The sisters have three brothers, aged 40, 30 and 28. Rowena lives with her husband (50) and her three children (8, 5, 3). Rowena's parents live in a city close by and she sees them regularly. Rowena is a management consultant and *Grace*, a geologist who lives with her 'de facto'. Rowena described herself as 'a temporary full-time mother'. They are not a close family. The sisters see each other infrequently and do not maintain close contact. Rowena's relationship with *Grace* was one of competitiveness when they were growing up and is now one of *distant companionship*. Rowena is close to her cousin and several female friends. She is white and middle class.

Lauren (37), Danielle (36), Shirley (34) and Marie (30)

Lauren is the eldest in a family of five siblings. She has a brother (31) and three sisters. I only spoke to Lauren and none of her sisters. She is a solicitor, a single mother and lives with her son Ryan (3) in a different city than her siblings who all live in Wales, in the area where she grew up. She is the only one among her siblings not to be married. Her siblings each have two children. Her brother Paul is a waiter, *Danielle* is unemployed and setting up her own business, *Shirley* is an infant school teacher, *Marie* works in a textile factory. Lauren and Ryan have regular contact with Ryan's father and with Lauren's family. Ryan spends his holidays with Lauren's parents and siblings in spite of the distance between their respective homes. The other important people in Lauren's life are her women friends. Lauren's relationships with her siblings are ones of *close companionship*. She is white, comes from a working-class family and is middle class.

Eliza (38), Alice (36), Diane (31), Rosemary (30) and Joy (28)

Eliza, Alice and Rosemary are three sisters I spoke to in a family of five daughters. Their two other sisters, *Diane* (31) and *Joy* (28), were approached by the three sisters and decided not to take part in the study. The five women all live in the same area of the same city, within an easy drive from each other. They all get on and have a lot of contact with each other. Eliza and Alice are both accountants and Rosemary is a physiotherapist. *Diane* and *Joy* both have professional jobs. All the sisters live with partners except for Alice who is single; *Joy*, the youngest, is about to get married. Eliza is the only mother: she and her partner Pete have two sons, Chris (5) and Andrew (1). Their social networks are very entwined: Alice works with Eliza's partner Pete; and Pete and Rosemary's partner D.J. together. Their relationships are ones of *close companionship*. They are black African-Caribbean and middle class.

Leonie (48), Jeanne (45), Roxanne (39) and Madonna (31)

Leonie, Jeanne, Roxanne and Madonna are four sisters I spoke to in a family of seven siblings. Their brothers figure marginally in their narratives: one lives in England, one abroad and the whereabouts of the third are vague. Roxanne was the first of the family who I interviewed and she approached her sisters about taking part in the study. Roxanne and Leonie live in two adjacent towns in the South and their mother lives in the same area. Their father died almost a decade ago. Jeanne and Madonna live in the same town in the North. Leonie, the eldest, is a seamstress, divorced with two sons, and her eldest has just left home. Roxanne is a lecturer at a College of Further Education and Jeanne is a doctor (GP). They are both divorced and mothers: Roxanne lives with her daughter Lucille (12) and new partner Trevor; Jeanne lives with her son Dylan (13) and new partner Thomas. Madonna, the youngest, is training to be a singer, single and lives in a shared house. The relationships

between them vary between *distant* and *close companionship*. They are white, originally from a working class-family and middle class.

SISTERS IN THEIR FORTIES

Anne (38), Flora (40), Hailey (33) and Diana (30)

I spoke to Anne first and her sister Flora subsequently. The sisters live in different cities in the same part of the country. Anne is single, Flora is married and lives with Rupert, her husband and their two daughters aged 13 (Clara) and 8 (Emily). Anne is a writer and Flora, a theatre director. They are the eldest in a family of four daughters. Their sister *Hailey* (33) is single and lives in Ireland where the family come from. *Diana* (30) is married and works in Europe. Anne and Flora are not very intimate yet they see each other the most, usually with Flora's children, owing to geography, as well as at family gatherings. Their relationship is one of *close companionship*. They are white and middle class.

Leila (40) and Annar (38)

I interviewed Leila alone and not *Annar*. Leila and *Annar* live in different neighbourhoods of the same city. Leila is single, *Annar* lives with her husband and three children, aged 10, 7 and 2. Leila trained to be an optician and *Annar*, a nurse. They are the youngest in a family of six siblings: they have four older brothers. They were raised and educated in the Middle-East and Britain. Their father died a few years ago and their mother is still alive. After a distant and competitive relationship from their teens to their thirties Leila and *Annar* now have a 'sisterly' relationship of *best friendship* even though they do not have a lot in common. Leila is Asian and middle class.

Carmen (47) and Rita (33)

Carmen is the eldest in a family of six siblings. When she finished school, she left Puerto Rico and came to the UK. She is single, works as a secretary and personal assistant and lives in a city with her two sons aged 14 and 8. Her sister *Rita* is 14 years younger than her, works as a secretary and lives in Madrid with her husband and two daughters. Carmen left home at 18 when *Rita* was 4 and they picked up their relationship when *Rita* moved to Europe in her early 20s. Her four brothers (Lawrence, Clark, Montgomery, Gene) live abroad apart from Lawrence who lives in the same city as Carmen. His late wife - her sister-in-law Ellen, who died four years ago, age 42 - became her best friend. The other significant people in her network include her neighbour Moira and her cousin Teresa who is 48 and with whom Carmen is closer than with her sister. The relationship between Carmen and *Rita* is one of *distant companionship*. Both Carmen's parents are dead. She is of mixed parentage and working class.

SISTERS IN THEIR FIFTIES

Clare (50) and Stella (52)

I interviewed Clare on her own, *Stella* did not take part in the study. Clare is the middle child in a family of three siblings. She comes from a Scottish family and lives in an English city with her dog Ruby. She works as a freelance journalist and has a new boyfriend. *Stella*, a social worker, is married and lives with her husband and two children in a rural area in a different part of the country than Clare. Her brother (46) is married with three children and lives near *Stella*. The sisters rarely see each other, except at family events and their relationship is one of *distant companionship*. Clare has a disability which is not acknowledged or discussed in the family. Their widowed mother lives in the same county as *Stella*. The important people in Clare's network are her cousins Joan (45), Agatha (65) and Agatha's sister, Enid who recently died aged 70, and her women friends. Clare is white and middle class.

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